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Metaphors in Specialized Discourses In and Across Cultures

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Metaphors as Cognitive, Discursive and Cultural Phenomena: Why here, why now

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Abstract

This special issue of CULTUS: The Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication brings together six original studies that investigate the cognitive, discursive, and cultural dimensions of metaphor in specialized domains. They collectively map the ways in which figurative language structures expert and lay communication across health, political, media, and scientific domains, while simultaneously functioning as a site of intercultural negotiation when specialized texts move across linguistic boundaries. The issue is organized in two thematic parts. Part I examines metaphor as a communicative and framing device within specialized discourses. Part II shifts the lens to metaphor in translation and cross-linguistic transfer. Taken together, the contributions advance the understanding of how metaphor operates not merely as a rhetorical ornament but as a culturally embedded cognitive instrument whose stabilization, transformation, or loss in specialized and translated discourse has concrete consequences for knowledge construction and communication.

Keywords: metaphor; specialized discourse; intercultural communication; translation; cognitive linguistics; corpus linguistics; cross-linguistic comparison

1. Framing the Issue: Why Metaphor, Why Now, Why Here

Few concepts in language studies have proved as durable (or as contested) as metaphor. From Aristotle's rhetorical definition of metaphor as the transportation of a name belonging to something else (Aristotle 1995 1457b), through Richards's (1936) tenor-vehicle distinction, to the foundational cognitive turn inaugurated by Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), the field has undergone successive reconceptualizations that have each time expanded both the object of inquiry and its theoretical stakes. What began as a matter of poetic ornamentation has become, over the last four decades, a matter of cognitive architecture, cultural knowledge, and communicative power. This trajectory is by now familiar to any scholar working in the cognitive or discourse-analytic tradition. The question that motivates this special issue is not whether metaphor matters (that debate is settled) but rather *where and how* it matters when it operates inside specialized domains, across cultural boundaries, and increasingly across the linguistic frontier imposed by translation (van den Broeck 1981).

Metaphor, as the contributors gathered here collectively demonstrate, is not a decorative surface feature of specialized texts; it is a structuring device that shapes how knowledge is packaged, how authority is distributed between experts and lay audiences, how cultures conceptualize illness, political struggle, financial risk, and scientific complexity, and how these conceptualizations travel, or resist travelling, when texts are rendered in another language. The intercultural dimension is therefore not an addendum to the study of specialized metaphor: it is constitutive of it.

2. Theoretical Background: Metaphor as Cognitive, Discursive, and Cultural Phenomenon

The theoretical landscape from which the contributions in this issue draw is broad but coherent at its core. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Lakoff and Johnson 1980) established the foundational claim that metaphor is not a matter of language but of thought: it is a cross-domain mapping from a more concrete or familiar source domain onto a more abstract or less familiar target domain. This move, from rhetoric to cognition, had far-reaching consequences. It reframed the question of universality and cultural variation, since the same conceptual metaphor (*life is a journey*; *argument is war*) could be shown to recur across typologically unrelated languages while

simultaneously exhibiting culture-specific instantiations at the linguistic surface.

Kövecses (2000; 2005; 2008) pursued this tension systematically, arguing that while many primary and complex metaphors display a cross-cultural stability grounded in shared embodied experience, the specific elaborations, extensions, and preferences that cultures develop diverge considerably. His work on universality and variation in metaphor directly motivates the cross-linguistic design of every study in this volume. Equally central is Semino's (2008) observation that metaphors vary in their textual appearance and in the discursive functions they perform, an insight that gains particular force when the contexts examined are specialized genres with their own rhetorical economies, audience expectations, and epistemic norms.

The methodological toolkit deployed across the six studies is correspondingly pluralist. MIPVU (Metaphor Identification Procedure VU Amsterdam; Steen *et al.* 2010; 2011) provides a reliable intersubjective procedure for identifying metaphorically used words at the level of linguistic expression. Metaphorical Pattern Analysis (Stefanowitsch 2004; 2007) offers a corpus-driven approach to mapping the statistical distribution of source and target domain vocabulary. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) social semiotic model of visual grammar extends the analysis to multimodal texts, where metaphorical meaning is not confined to the verbal channel. Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis, Toury's (2012) translation norms framework, and Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions model round out an interdisciplinary apparatus that, taken together, is markedly more eclectic than any single paradigm could sustain. This eclecticism is not a weakness; it reflects the genuine complexity of metaphor when studied *in vivo*, across domains and across cultures.

One dimension that runs across both parts of this issue and deserves explicit theoretical marking is the distinction between *conventionalized* and *creative* metaphor. As Goatly (1997) and Müller (2008) argued, and as Narisano and Giribaldi develop in detail in their contribution, conventionality and creativity are best conceived not as binary oppositions but as poles of a cline. Conventionalized metaphors, entrenched through repetition and codified in the lexicon, tend to become invisible as metaphors, naturalizing particular framings of social reality (Charteris-Black 2004; Krennmayr 2015). Creative metaphors, by contrast, foreground the mapping and invite interpretive effort. This cline matters in specialized discourse because the degree of metaphoricity affects not only

comprehension and persuasion but also the translatability of a text: highly conventionalized source-domain expressions may lack equivalents in the target language, while creative elaborations may resist any direct rendering at all.

3. The Contributions: A Critical Overview

The six studies are organized in two parts that reflect a principled distinction: Part I examines metaphor as a communicative and framing device *within* specialized discourses; Part II examines metaphor *in translation*, that is the processes by which metaphorical meaning is transferred, modified, or lost as specialized texts cross linguistic boundaries. This organization is not merely taxonomic. It reflects a progression from metaphor as a tool of intralingual knowledge construction to metaphor as a site of interlingual and intercultural negotiation, a trajectory that maps directly onto communication and translation as forms of cultural mediation.

3.1 Part I: Metaphor in Specialized Discourse

Francesca Luisa Seracini establishes the social and clinical stakes of metaphor research from the outset in her contribution *Representing eating disorders online: metaphor, identity and agency in English and Italian social media discourse*. Drawing on CMT (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and applying both MIPVU (Steen *et al.* 2010) and Metaphorical Pattern Analysis (Stefanowitsch 2004; 2007) to posts from English- and Italian-speaking online communities on eating disorders, Seracini identifies three shared conceptual metaphors: *eating disorder is a destructive force*, *eating disorder is a (harmful) place*, *eating disorder is a path*. Alongside these, the study documents culture-specific divergences. The study makes a methodologically sound case for online forum data as “unfiltered, real-world” material that captures the lived experiential dimension of mental health discourse. What is particularly valuable here, from an intercultural perspective, is the finding that convergence at the conceptual level does not preclude divergence at the level of linguistic instantiation and community framing. This result complicates facile claims about the universality of embodied metaphor. The clinical implications are explicit: understanding the metaphors patients use

to narrate their experience is not a hermeneutic luxury but a precondition for effective communication in therapeutic and public health contexts.

The investigation by **Daniela Cesiri**, *Visual and Verbal Tropes in Medical Knowledge Dissemination: An English-Italian Cross-Linguistic Study of Lactose Intolerance Websites*, moves from the participatory space of social media to the authoritative space of institutional health websites, comparing eight sites (four Anglophone, four Italian) that address lactose intolerance for lay audiences. Cesiri's multimodal approach, combining CMT and Kövecses's (2020) Extended CMT for verbal metaphors with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar for images, reveals that *visual metonymy and synecdoche* predominate over metaphor proper, while the verbal channel consistently draws on the established source domain *body is machine*. The cross-cultural comparison, framed through Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions, produces a counterintuitive finding: Power Distance is effectively *reversed* in the US pages, where symptom reporting defers to patients' self-perception, while Italian pages maintain the specialist's epistemic authority. This finding is both analytically precise and culturally significant: the metaphors chosen to render illness visible to a lay audience are not culturally neutral but encode distinct assumptions about the doctor-patient relationship and the distribution of medical knowledge. Read alongside Seracini's study, it establishes health discourse as a domain where metaphor and intercultural variation are inseparable.

Laura Narisano and **Elena Giribaldi**'s study, *Degrees of Metaphoricity: Conventionality and Creativity in Newspaper Sustainability Discourse*, shifts domain (from health to sustainability) and analytic focus (from identification to gradience). Working on a bilingual comparable corpus of British and Italian newspaper articles, Narisano and Giribaldi propose a multi-criteria gradient framework that locates metaphors on a cline from highly conventionalized mappings through topic-triggered expressions, extended mappings, and creative recontextualizations. The cross-linguistic comparison reveals both convergence, in the form of shared conventional framings of sustainability, and divergence in the mechanisms through which creativity emerges, with headline constraints and topic-triggering identified as contextual factors that systematically condition metaphorical choices.

This study is the most theoretically explicit of the three in Part I on the conventionality-creativity dimension, and its gradient model offers a transferable analytical tool that subsequent comparative work could usefully adopt. It also completes Part I's three-domain coverage: health (personal), health (institutional) and media/environment. Taken together, these

establish that metaphorical framing in specialized discourse is not domain-specific in its mechanisms, even when it is domain-specific in its preferred mappings.

3.2 Part II: Metaphor in Translation

Part II opens with a contribution that anchors the translation dimension in a politically charged and historically specific corpus. In *The Roads We Take: The Metaphor of the Journey in Lenin's Works and Their Finnish Translations*, **Mikhail Mikhailov** and **Satu Valkiainen** examine the JOURNEY metaphor in Lenin's Russian political writings and their Finnish translations, drawing on LenCor (a monolingual Russian corpus) and the parallel Russian-Finnish subcorpus of ParVLen. The semi-automatic methodology, based on concordance searches on four high-frequency lexical triggers (*put'*, *doroga*, *povorot*, *pohod*) followed by manual annotation, allows fine-grained differentiation between abstract directional metaphor (*put'*), materialized road features (*doroga*), moments of historical rupture (*povorot*), and the convergence of JOURNEY and WAR metaphors in *pohod*. The translation analysis reveals a tendency toward metaphor preservation across time, with early variation giving way to later standardization, a finding that raises important questions about translation norms and the ideological stabilization of political discourse across language communities. The contribution of this study to the intercultural dimension of this special issue is particularly clear: it demonstrates that political metaphors are negotiated across linguistic systems that may lack structural equivalents, and that negotiation has ideological as well as linguistic consequences.

The fifth contribution, *Conceptual Metaphor Change in Popular Science Translation: Understanding Mathematics in English, Polish and Italian*, by **Monika Prysok**, addresses the translation of metaphor in popular science, a genre whose defining communicative challenge is precisely the mediation between expert knowledge and lay comprehension. Using MIPVU (Steen *et al.* 2011) on a parallel unidirectional corpus of *Scientific American* articles and their Polish (*Świat Nauki*) and Italian (*Le Scienze*) translations, Prysok maps variations in metaphoricity across the three languages, finding that translations both reproduce source metaphors and introduce new ones grounded in different source domains. This trilingual design is the most structurally ambitious of the translation studies in the volume and produces findings that speak directly to the cognitive function of metaphor in

knowledge popularization: if translations systematically alter the source domains from which explanatory metaphors are drawn, then the conceptual scaffolding available to Polish and Italian readers of popularized mathematics is not identical to that available to English readers. The implications for science communication across languages, and for the assumption that popular science translation is a transparent process of linguistic substitution, are worth pressing further than the study's scope allows, but the empirical basis it establishes is solid.

In *Metaphor and Prompting Effects in AI Translation of Specialised Financial Discourse: A Spanish–English Case Study*, **Chelo Vargas-Sierra** and **Antonio Moreno-Sandoval** address a question that none of the other studies in the volume could have posed a decade ago: how do large language models and neural machine translation systems perform when confronted with specialized figurative language? Testing six system-prompting conditions (Google Translate, DeepL, ChatGPT zero-shot and few-shot, Deepseek zero-shot and few-shot) on 26 financial metaphors from shareholder letters (Spanish to English), the study evaluates translation quality across four dimensions: semantic precision, metaphorical equivalence, register appropriateness, and clarity and fluency. The finding that LLMs with zero-shot prompting outperform NMT systems on figurative adequacy and register fit, while few-shot prompting produces model-specific divergence (ChatGPT stable; Deepseek sharply degraded), is both practically significant and theoretically provocative. It suggests that the relationship between prompt design and metaphor translation is neither linear nor predictable across models, a result that should give pause to any uncritical deployment of AI translation in high-stakes financial communication. Positioned at the close of the volume, this study performs a deliberate opening onto an emerging research agenda: the interaction between specialized metaphor, cultural embedding, and machine cognition.

4. Cross-Cutting Themes and the Logic of the Collection

Reading across the six contributions, several cross-cutting themes emerge that are worth making explicit, since they constitute the intellectual coherence of this issue beyond the organizational logic of its two-part structure.

Firstly, the English-Italian pairing recurs in three of the six studies (Seracini; Cesiri; Narisano and Giribaldi) as one of the language pairs under

investigation. The convergences and divergences that emerge from this implicit comparison merit systematic attention in future work.

Secondly, the question of corpus methodology threads through every study, though the corpora differ substantially in type, size, and construction: online forum posts (Seracini), institutional websites (Cesiri), comparable newspaper corpora (Narisano and Giribaldi), monolingual and parallel literary-political corpora (Mikhailov and Valkiainen), parallel unidirectional translation corpora (Prysok), and a purpose-built evaluation corpus of machine-translated instances (Vargas-Sierra and Moreno-Sandoval). This diversity is a resource rather than an inconsistency: it demonstrates that corpus-assisted metaphor analysis is not restricted to any single genre or data type, while also inviting reflection on how corpus design conditions what can be found.

Third, all six studies converge on the claim that metaphor in specialized discourse is a *culturally variable* phenomenon: the mappings available to a given community, the conventionalization pathways those mappings follow, and the resistance or openness of those mappings to translation are all shaped by cultural factors that cannot be reduced to linguistic structure alone. Whether the relevant cultural variable is Power Distance in health communication (Cesiri), ideological tradition in political translation (Mikhailov and Valkiainen), genre convention in sustainability journalism (Narisano and Giribaldi), or model-specific sensitivity to priming in AI translation (Vargas-Sierra and Moreno-Sandoval), the consistent finding is the same: metaphor does not travel neutrally across cultural boundaries, and the conditions of its transfer are always partly extralinguistic.

5. A Note on Sequence and Critical Limitations

The organization of this issue (from metaphor in discourse to metaphor in translation, from health to sustainability, politics, science, and to finance) is intended to be cumulative rather than merely additive. Each study builds implicitly on insights from those preceding it, and the reader who moves through the special issue sequentially will find that later contributions acquire additional resonance from earlier ones. The JOURNEY metaphor in Lenin's discourse, for example, is best appreciated in the light of 83and Giribaldi's analysis of how conventional mappings structure social reality;

both studies gain depth when read against the translational instability documented by Prysok, and by Vargas-Sierra and Moreno-Sandoval.

That said, two limitations of the present collection should be acknowledged. First, the domain coverage, while genuinely broad, remains weighted toward health communication (two of six studies) and does not yet address legal, technical, or tourism discourse, domains in which metaphor research has a substantial tradition and where the intercultural stakes are equally high. Second, the language pairs represented, while diverse, leave large areas of metaphorical geography unexplored: East Asian, Arabic, or African language contexts are absent. being aware of them means taking these gaps into consideration for future issues to fill.

6. Conclusion

The contributors gathered here represent a range of methodological traditions, disciplinary formations, and national research contexts. What they share is a conviction that metaphor in specialized discourse is neither a peripheral concern nor a settled question. As specialized knowledge becomes increasingly global in its production and increasingly mediated in its dissemination through digital platforms, AI translation tools, and multilingual popular science, the cultural work that metaphor performs in these processes becomes more consequential, not less. This special issue is offered as a contribution to the sustained scholarly attention that work deserves.

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