

## METAPHORS AND METONYMIES OF SURPRISE IN ENGLISH

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***Abstract:** The paper studies the language of surprise in English on a corpus built from the internet site <<https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/surprise>> and presents the metonymies and metaphors that may complete Kövecses's (2000, 2015) findings. The results prove that surprise is a prototypical emotion; however, it has certain non-prototypical peculiarities.*

***Keywords:** folk-model, metaphor, metonymy, non-prototypical/prototypical emotion, surprise*

### 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics claims that language reveals a lot about our conceptual system (Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1987), which means that the language of emotions is a good basis of study if we are interested in emotion concepts. Cognitive linguistic research has studied the language of a great number of specific emotions in a large variety of languages (see Lakoff 1987, Kövecses 1990, 2000, Apresjan 1997, Wierzbicka 1999, Ansah 2011, Esenova 2011, Ogarkova, Soriano 2014) and has found that it abounds in figurative expressions which can be classified as metaphors and metonymies. Metaphors and metonymies of specific emotions allow us to find linguistic evidence of how specific emotion concepts are built and we may draw conclusions regarding the generic concept of emotion. Kövecses (2015: 271) claims that “the conceptual structures that emerge from the metaphors and metonymies are taken to be *language-based folk models*”, which present the way everyday people understand (their) emotions.

This paper<sup>2</sup> studies the language of surprise in English and is inspired by two studies written by Kövecses. Kövecses (2000: 33) identifies three emotion metaphors, while Kövecses (2015) identifies several others and a small number of metonymies. The present study uses a corpus built from the internet site <<https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/surprise>> and aims at identifying metaphors and metonymies instantiated in the corpus, comparing its findings to Kövecses's and drawing conclusions whether or not these findings modify the language-based folk model of surprise described by Kövecses (2015).

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## 2. Surprise

Surprise is one of the six universal basic emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise, see Ekman et al. 1972). Surprise is a very short-lasting emotion, which is normally triggered by sudden or unexpected things and events. The function of surprise is to focus our attention to the triggering event so that we could decide whether the event is good or bad, dangerous or not to our well-being.

Universal basic emotions are commonly accompanied by facial expressions and bodily movements that are characteristic of people all around the world and easily recognized by them, independently of their cultural and social backgrounds. When people are surprised, their eyebrows are raised and curved, they have transverse wrinkles above their brows on their foreheads, their eyes open wide and the whites of the eyes become visible, their pupils dilate and their mouths open wide. Darwin (1999: 278) notices that “The degree to which the eyes and mouth are opened corresponds with the degree of surprise felt”. Typical bodily movements may be the hands or arms shooting up in the air, a surprised person may step back or jump, scream and/or gasp or even become speechless, especially when fear or fright is mixed with their surprise. Surprise, unlike other emotions, may be positive or negative, depending on how we appraise the triggering event. A state of surprise may be very short and cease to exist if we determine that there is no danger for us. However, surprise may develop into another emotion, like amazement or astonishment, fear or terror, depending on what has happened (Darwin 1999).

The term *surprise* is a polysemous lexeme, as Kövecses (2015: 276-278) points out. The term *surprise* can be used both as a noun and a verb. As a noun, it means a “feeling caused by sth. happening suddenly or unexpectedly” and an “event or thing that causes this feeling”, whereas as a verb it means “cause (sb.) to feel surprise” and “attack, discover, etc (sb.) suddenly and unexpectedly” (Hornby 1989). As can be seen, the noun can either refer to the emotion or the cause of the emotion, while the verb refers to the “process of causation” or “causing” (Kövecses 2015: 276). The three meanings of the term *surprise* constitute the causal structure of the coming about of the emotion, which is the same structure as other emotions have, that is, a triggering event causes the emotion.

## 3. Metonymies and metaphors of surprise

Investigating related literature in the field of cognitive linguistics, I have only found two studies on the emotion concept ‘surprise’ in English. One is a chapter on “Surprise Metaphors” in Kövecses’s *Metaphor and Emotion* (2000 33), where he lists the following three metaphors for surprise: SURPRISE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE: I was *staggered* by the report; A SURPRISED PERSON IS A BURST CONTAINER: I just *came apart at the seams* and SURPRISE IS A NATURAL FORCE: I was *overwhelmed* by surprise.

Kövecses makes two observations. One is that the BURST CONTAINER metaphor captures that “a surprised person temporarily loses control over himself or herself” and the other is that surprise is “the least metaphorically comprehended concept” in his list of emotions and explains it by claiming that “surprise is not a socially very complex phenomenon” (Kövecses 2000: 33). By the last remark, he

obviously refers to the fact that the list of surprise metaphors is the shortest one in his volume on emotion metaphors.

Kövecses (2015) covers both metonymies and metaphors of surprise. He claims that metonymies conceptualize physical effects, on the one hand, and, on the other, mental responses of surprise, both of which are in line with the kind of reactions that metonymies of emotions usually capture (see THE PHYSICAL EFFECT OF AN EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION Lakoff 1987 and Kövecses 1990 for specific level examples of PHYSIOLOGICAL and BEHAVIOURAL REACTIONS OF AN EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION in relation to anger, fear, romantic love, etc.). Kövecses (2015: 278) mentions two PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF SURPRISE FOR SURPRISE metonymies: EYES OPENING WIDE FOR SURPRISE and THE MOUTH OPENING WIDE FOR SURPRISE, which are two of the most characteristic details of facial expressions of surprise. He (idem: 279) discusses INABILITY TO SPEAK FOR SURPRISE (e.g. *speechless*), AN UPSETTING FEELING FOR SURPRISE (e.g. *shock, stun*) and INABILITY TO THINK CLEARLY FOR SURPRISE (e.g. *stupefied, dumbstruck*) as specific versions of the metonymy MENTAL RESPONSES OF SURPRISE FOR SURPRISE.

Kövecses (2015: 280-283) claims that the surprise process is conceptualized by the following metaphors: SURPRISING SOMEONE IS UNEXPECTEDLY IMPACTING SOMEONE: *She was shocked at the state of his injuries* and SURPRISING SOMEONE IS AN UNEXPECTED SEIZURE/ATTACK: *The questions took David by surprise; Tom caught Ann off guard and frightened her*. Kövecses argues that the common element in both situations depicted by the two metaphors is that the surprised person loses control over himself/ herself and adds that loss of control is part of the scenario of several other (prototypical) emotions, like anger or fear. It must be noted that as far as loss of control is concerned, surprise is similar to other emotions, however, unlike other emotions, surprise does not contain an attempt at control stage in its scenario.

Kövecses mentions a further metaphor of surprise: SURPRISE IS AN OBJECT, instantiated by phrases like *express/show/feign/hide surprise*. The interesting thing about this metaphor is that “the responses or symptoms associated with the emotion are metonymically viewed as standing for the emotion” (Kövecses 2015: 283). It needs to be added that the term *surprise* is also metonymically used to stand for the actual responses produced by the surprised person. The use of the OBJECT metaphor also makes surprise similar to a number of other emotions. In contrast with other emotions, surprise is not conceptualized by the OPPONENT, CAPTIVE ANIMAL, SOCIAL SUPERIOR, or FLUID IN A CONTAINER metaphors (idem: 285), which are fairly common among (more) prototypical emotions. Kövecses views the lack of these metaphors as evidence to prove that surprise cannot be seen as a prototypical emotion.

#### 4. My corpus and research questions

As stated in the Introduction, I have built a corpus of examples based on the internet site <<https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/surprise>>. The corpus has 498 sentences containing the term *surprise*, which is used as a noun in 462 sentences (92.87%) and as a verb in 36 sentences (7.23 %). For the purposes of the present paper, I have only studied the sentences that contain *surprise* as a noun to denote the emotion. In the present investigation, I apply Kövecses’s (1990: 33-49) lexical

approach, which is a method to collect and process data for uncovering the folk understanding of an emotion concept.

My starting point is Kövecses's (2015) argument that surprise has a mixture of prototypical and non-prototypical features of emotions and has only a small set of metonymies and metaphors that conceptualize it. Therefore, I have the following research questions:

- (a) What metonymies capturing physiological/bodily or behavioural reactions of surprise can be identified in my corpus?
- (b) What metaphors can be identified in my corpus?
- (c) How do my findings modify, if at all, the language-based folk model of surprise described by Kövecses (2015)?

In the remainder of the present paper, I will attempt to answer these questions and draw my conclusions.

## 5. Discussion

Emotions are accompanied by physiological reactions and a large part of the reactions are emotion specific: a change of heartbeat and an increase in body heat are characteristic of anger, turning white in the face area is typical of fear. As we have seen above, surprise is accompanied by the eyes opening wide, the eyebrows raised and the mouth opening or the jaws dropping. Linguistic expressions often describe these details and function as metonymies conceptualizing the physiological effects going together with surprise. In accordance with this, Kövecses (2015) identifies the metonymies EYES OPENING WIDE FOR SURPRISE and MOUTH OPENING FOR SURPRISE. My corpus contains sentences that depict details of opening the eyes, as in

- (1) His eyebrows jerked up in surprise.
- (2) His brows lifted in surprise.

as well as the ways surprised people look, as in

- (3) The officers gazed with surprise at Pierre's huge stout figure.
- (4) He blinked with surprise.

Examples (3) and (4) instantiate the metonymy WAYS OF LOOKING STAND FOR SURPRISE, which is a specific-level version of the metonymy THE BEHAVIOURAL REACTIONS OF AN EMOTION STAND FOR THE EMOTION (Kövecses 1990: 119).

Neither Darwin (1999) nor Ekman et al. (1972) give a description of how a surprised person breathes; however, my corpus contains examples like

- (5) She gasped in surprise/with surprise.

instantiating the metonymy WAYS OF BREATHING STAND FOR SURPRISE, which belongs to the more generic metonymy PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF SURPRISE STAND FOR SURPRISE (Kövecses 2015 – referred to above), or to the even more generic PHYSICAL EFFECTS/PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS OF AN EMOTION STAND FOR THE EMOTION.

Kövecses (2015) claims that a surprise experience may be so intense, that the surprised person is not able to speak and think clearly. The two mental effects are depicted in one of the sentences in my corpus:

- (6) He was silent in surprise once more, unable to understand how she might consider his battle plans nothing more than a complex game.

The two clauses in example (6) instantiate the metonymies INABILITY TO SPEAK STANDS FOR SURPRISE and INABILITY TO THINK CLEARLY STANDS FOR SURPRISE. Inability to breathe/speak/think is characteristic of fear, a rather prototypical emotion (Kövecses 1990: 71). In less intense cases of surprise, we are usually able to speak, and can do it in various ways, as shown in the following examples:

- (7) 'I will', Lisa responded with surprise.  
 (8) Lana almost uttered a cry of surprise, astonished he'd survived the missiles  
 (9) Alex exclaimed in surprise.  
 (10) A similar moan of surprise and horror ran through the crowd.

Thus, the metonymy WAYS OF SPEAKING STAND FOR SURPRISE; this is a further specific version of the MENTAL RESPONSES metonymy.

Behavioural reactions do not only mean mental responses, but also various movements of certain body parts, as in

- (11) She nodded, trying hard to recover from the latest surprise.  
 (12) She dropped back on her heels, staring up at him in surprise.

Nodding is the movement of the head and neck, dropping back on one's heels is the movement of the legs and feet, while recovering is not relevant in relation to movement and is not specific in relation to body parts, either. However, these and similar reactions show some form of bodily agitation, therefore they may be identified as instantiations of the metonymy AGITATED BEHAVIOUR STANDS FOR SURPRISE (or to put it more generally BODILY AGITATION STANDS FOR EMOTION, see Kövecses 1990: 168). Again, agitation is characteristic of various emotions, anger in particular (idem: 52), however, responses like *trembling, shaking, quivering*, etc. (cf. *I stood there trembling with emotion, The experience made him shake, He quivered all over*) usually describe high levels of physiological arousal (idem: 168). Nodding one's head or dropping on one's heels seem less intense reactions than trembling, but they definitely show some degree of disturbance.

When we experience a very intense emotion, fear or surprise in particular, we may become unable to do certain things that are otherwise part of our normal physical and mental functioning, such as breathing, speaking and thinking clearly. Sometimes our linguistic expressions do not depict such details, but give a more general description as in

- (13) Three Others with glowing purple eyes stood several feet away, frozen in surprise.

In example (13), the phrase *frozen in surprise* may refer to a drop in body temperature, but it is more likely to refer to the surprised persons' being unable to do anything, thus instantiating the metonymy INABILITY TO FUNCTION

NORMALLY STANDS FOR SURPRISE, which is a further variety of the INABILITY metonymy and captures a characteristic behavioural reaction.

So far we have discussed examples that describe various aspects of physiological and behavioural reactions that a surprised person has. We have found that the movements of certain parts of the face (eyes, eyebrows, mouth, jaws) are rather typical in a state of surprise. Several sentences in my corpus give more general descriptions of the face, as in the following examples:

- (14) Billy Langstrom's body stared out from beneath the overturned Jeep, eyes open, a look of mixed surprise and horror on his young face as he lay in a pool of darkening blood.
- (15) Surprise was written on Dean's face.
- (16) The Watcher turned away from the window, surprise on its face.
- (17) Surprise crossed Brandon's face.
- (18) Kris looked up, surprise crossing his face.

In sentence (14) the term *surprise* denotes the emotion, while in sentences (15) to (17) *surprise* is metonymically used to refer to the expression of the emotion appearing on one's face. I find that this "overall reference" to the expression of surprise on the face serves as a summation of all the characteristic details, such as the eyes and eyebrows, the mouth and the jaws. It is a matter of course that the face serves as a location for surprise expressions to appear. Thus, the metonymy THE TERM *SURPRISE* STANDS FOR A SUM OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS OF SURPRISE combined with the metaphor THE FACE IS A LOCATION FOR SURPRISE EXPRESSIONS.

It is interesting to note in relation to sentence (14) that it describes the facial expression of the person involved in the accident (the casualty) and the phrase *a look of mixed surprise and horror* refers to a mixture of his emotions, surprise and horror. This example illustrates that surprise may develop into or may be combined with another (either positive or negative) emotion, depending on the events and their appraisal by the experiencer.

In sentences (14) to (16) we can see surprise as an inanimate object in a static situation, since it "is" on someone's face; however, in (17) and (18), surprise is more "dynamic", it is shown as an animated object. Sentences

- (19) The memory – fuzzy for fifteen years – grew crisp, and surprise and hope went through her as she recalled the night that'd changed everything.
- (20) Surprise trickled through him.

do not only show surprise as a dynamic entity, but also due to the choice of verbs, they allow for a different understanding of surprise, namely as a fluid rather than an object of any kind. Therefore, based on sentences (17, 18), I propose the metaphor *SURPRISE IS AN ANIMATED OBJECT*, whereas based on sentences (19) and (20), the metaphor *SURPRISE IS A FLUID (IN A CONTAINER)*. By the latter metaphor, I challenge Kövecses's (2015: 285) view that surprise is not conceptualized as a fluid in a container; however, I admit that it may only be a sporadic example and not a conventionalized expression. At the same time, I do not argue with his idea that other source domains are more commonly used and more elaborated for surprise.

In the following two examples, surprise looks even more dynamic or active than in the previous three sentences, where it is seen as an animate object:

(21) For a moment surprise captured her tongue.

(22) Surprise visits and inspections.

In sentence (21), surprise may be understood as a warrior, in (22) as a detective, which may be subsumed under the term ‘animate object’. Therefore, I propose the metaphor SURPRISE IS AN ANIMATE OBJECT.

Kövecses’s (2015) analysis of examples like (21) and (22) is different from mine, because he claims implicitly that the key component in an act or process of surprising is the unexpected character of the event, due to which the experiencer loses control over himself/herself; thus the process is metaphorically conceptualized as SURPRISING (SOMEONE) IS AN UNEXPECTED SEIZURE/ATTACK. In my analysis, surprise (being the cause) is understood as an animate object (an agent), which takes an active part in the events (and, as a consequence, controls the situation). Contrary to this, when surprise is understood as an object (cf. SURPRISE IS AN OBJECT, *express, register, show, pretend, hide*, etc. *surprise*), it is viewed as a passive component of the situation which is detected, comes about or to which certain things happen as a result of some action, as exemplified in

(23) I sensed his surprise, and a hint of nervousness.

(24) The appointment caused much surprise at the time, as Billow was little known outside diplomatic circles.

(25) Perhaps our knowledge of Johnson's sentiments regarding the Scots in general [...] may lessen our surprise at this vehemence.

The last group of figurative expressions in my corpus are of the structure *do sth in surprise*. The examples mainly describe the ways people look at things and say or ask about things when they are surprised:

(26) He looked up in surprise.

(27) Carmen stared at her in surprise.

(28) Alex raised his brows in obvious surprise.

(29) Her eyes went to Kiera in surprise.

(30) Bianca cried out in surprise.

(31) ... Felipa asked in surprise.

The verbal expressions in (26) to (29) refer to certain movements of the eyes and eyebrows, while in (30) and (31) the verbs denote ways of communication. The prepositional phrase *in surprise* describes how the actions denoted by the verbal expressions are done, in other words they refer to the emotional states of the experiencers. *In* is a preposition denoting location. The metaphor conceptualizing examples (26-31) is (A) SURPRISE (STATE) IS A LOCATION, which is related to the generic level metaphors EMOTIONS ARE BOUNDED SPACES and STATES ARE LOCATIONS (cf. *She flew into anger, She was in an angry mood, He was in a state of anger*, Kövecses 1990: 66).

## 6. Conclusion

In the present paper, I have outlined *surprise*, one of the universal basic emotions, reviewed the metonymies and metaphors identified by Kövecses (2000, 2015), and challenged his claim that surprise is conceptualized by only a small set

of metonymies (two versions of PHYSICAL EFFECTS STAND FOR SURPRISE and three versions of MENTAL RESPONSES OF SURPRISE STAND FOR SURPRISE) and metaphors (SURPRISE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE, A SURPRISED PERSON IS A BURST CONTAINER, SURPRISE IS A NATURAL FORCE and SURPRISE IS AN OBJECT). My aim has been to investigate the language of surprise for further figurative expressions and find out whether they fit into the concept of surprise.

I have found the following metonymies: (a) WAYS OF LOOKING STAND FOR SURPRISE, (b) THE TERM *SURPRISE* STANDS FOR A SUM OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS OF SURPRISE, (c) WAYS OF BREATHING STAND FOR SURPRISE, (d) WAYS OF SPEAKING STAND FOR SURPRISE, (e) AGITATED BEHAVIOUR STANDS FOR SURPRISE and (f) INABILITY TO FUNCTION NORMALLY STANDS FOR SURPRISE. Metonymies (a), (b) and (c) describe physiological reactions and are versions of PHYSICAL EFFECTS STAND FOR SURPRISE, while (d), (e) and (f) refer to behavioural reactions and are versions of MENTAL RESPONSES OF SURPRISE STAND FOR SURPRISE. All these metonymies serve as proof that surprise is accompanied by reactions that are characteristic of a number of other prototypical emotions.

I have identified the following metaphors in my corpus: (g) SURPRISE IS AN INANIMATE OBJECT, (h) SURPRISE IS AN ANIMATED OBJECT, (i) SURPRISE IS AN ANIMATE OBJECT, (j) SURPRISE IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER and (k) SURPRISE IS A LOCATION. The metaphor SURPRISE IS AN OBJECT is exemplified by *express/show/feign/hide surprise* in Kövecses (2015), however, instantiated by metaphorical expressions of its versions (g), (h) and (i), it proves to be a well-elaborated generic metaphor. Metaphors (j) and (k) are not identified by Kövecses (2000, 2015); however, (j) captures the most prototypical image of emotions, although it has a very small number of instantiations in my corpus, while (k) also depicts a prototypical detail of surprise and is a specific version of the generic metaphor EMOTIONS ARE LOCATIONS (cf. *look at sb. in anger/sadness/surprise/sorrow, be in love*).

To sum up, by presenting the results of my corpus-based research into the language of surprise, I hope to have contributed to a more complex picture of physical/physiological and behavioural reactions accompanying surprise. The data support my view that surprise has a lot in common with other prototypical emotions (cf. Kövecses 2015: 284), the metonymies and metaphors identified here fit into the concept of surprise and do not basically modify the language-based folk model of surprise.

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