

METAPHORICAL CONSTRUCTS IN THE ROMANIAN YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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***Abstract:** The paper is focused on the metaphors used by Romanian young people when expressing their perceptions of the European identity and when discussing the manner in which Romania's status as a member of the European Union affects their everyday life. In line with the principles of cognitive linguistics, which argue that metaphorical language use is a reflection of the way people think, I consider that the metaphors thus identified are not only relevant for my subjects' attitudes towards the present social and political realities, but they can also guide various professionals with a role as shapers of the European identity.*

***Keywords:** cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, European identity, European Union (EU)*

1. Introduction

In an article on collective identity written in the early '90s, Anthony Judge (1991) noted that the notion of Europe is more and more difficult to comprehend. If that was the perception more than thirty years ago, we can imagine how difficult it is to understand our continent today, when the European Union (EU), basically meant as "a cornerstone of European stability and prosperity" (cf. Archick 2021: 1), is characterized by a far more complicated situation. Lately, the European Union has been confronted with various types of internal crises, such as the crisis of multiculturalism, social and political crises (for instance, the Brexit), crises of a financial and economic nature (illustrated, for instance, by the eurozone crisis), the crisis created by the large influx of non-European refugees and migrants, as well as with a multitude of external challenges.

People tend to consider that problems like those mentioned above represent "the business" of the specialists in politics, economy, or sociology, but this is only partially true. The reality is that the European Union, with both its benefits and its problems, exerts a certain influence on the lives of the citizens in all the member states making it up. This idea represents the guiding principle of a course on European Institutions that I teach to the 1st year students enrolled in the Theory and Practice of Translation MA programme, organized by the West University of Timișoara. During this course, I try to raise the students' awareness about a series of issues specific to the European Union, issues which, even if apparently remote from our immediate sphere of interest, are actually factors that affect us to a larger or lesser extent. In an attempt to identify my students' preliminary knowledge and their expectations at the beginning of this course, I usually ask them to reflect a little bit and offer their personal views on the issue of the European identity and on Romania's status as a member of the EU. Doing this for several years, I have been

surprised to discover that my students' answers contained numerous metaphors, and, at a certain moment, I decided to study this phenomenon in a more systematic manner. Therefore, I initiated a research study that was focused on the metaphorical constructs used by the Romanian students when expressing their perceptions of the European Union, in general, and of the European identity in particular.

In discussing the metaphors identified as a result of my investigation, I rely on the insights offered by cognitive linguistics. For a thorough understanding of the principles underlying the present study, in the following section I will outline the theoretical framework that I have adopted, making reference, at the same time, to some practical evidence provided by other researchers interested in the phenomenon of metaphor.

2. On metaphor and its use

The use and the implications of metaphors have preoccupied scholars since ancient times, one of the earliest approaches in this respect coming from Aristotle. In the traditional theory, metaphor is a property of words: the name of a certain entity is used with reference to another entity, due to a point of similarity existing between the two. Such associations of words are often used for artistic and rhetorical purposes, and, consequently, are encountered more frequently in literary works than in non-literary contexts. In order to use metaphors, people need a special talent, so it is believed that only great poets and orators can really master them. Thus, metaphor is often regarded as a peripheral linguistic phenomenon that people can do without, as it is used only for the sake of achieving special effects, and it does not represent an inevitable part of everyday communication (cf. Kövecses 2002: vii-viii). This traditional view shaped the perception and the study of metaphor until the early '80s, when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) published their book entitled *Metaphors We Live By*, a book which challenged the aspects mentioned above and offered a different perspective on this phenomenon.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) state from the very beginning that metaphor is not peripheral to language: on the contrary, it "is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action". In their opinion, metaphors are "not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words" (idem: 6), but should be understood as metaphorical concepts, because "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (ibid.). In this way, Lakoff and Johnson established the view that metaphors are not only ornamental devices that make thoughts more vivid and communication more interesting, but also tools that play an important role in structuring peoples' perceptions and in processing their conceptual knowledge.

Lakoff and Johnson's book marked the beginning of the conceptual metaphor theory, being followed by a large amount of research "that has confirmed, added to and also modified" (Kövecses 2017a: 13) the initial ideas. One of the scholars with an essential contribution to the further development of the conceptual metaphor theory is Zoltan Kövecses. In line with Lakoff and Johnson's view, he (2002, 2017a) defines the conceptual metaphor as understanding one domain of experience in terms of another. The two domains involved in the conceptual metaphor are called the source domain and the target domain. The source domain, which is typically concrete, represents the conceptual domain that is used in order to enable the understanding of another conceptual domain. The

target domain, which is typically abstract, refers to the conceptual domain which we try to understand with the help of the source domain. The cognitive process underlying metaphor is possible due to a set of fixed correspondences (or mappings) between the source and the target domain (Kövecses 2002: 12). In the process of metaphorical conceptualization, an essential role is played by the context, but as Kövecses (2015, 2017b) argues, context should be understood in a broad sense, “one that covers our cognitive interaction with various elements and properties of the situation of discourse, the discourse itself, the conceptual-cognitive background, and the body of the speaker” (Kövecses 2017b: 322).

The contributions made by Lakoff and Johnson, on the one hand, and by Kövecses, on the other, have turned the study of metaphor into one of the central areas of research in the general field of cognitive linguistics. My own research study is based on the principles put forward by these contributions, as I will illustrate in the next section. However, the cognitive view on metaphor did not stimulate only the linguistics-oriented type of research. The claim that metaphors represent an expression of the humans’ thought inspired a great number of scientific articles, books, and conferences in a variety of other disciplines, like philosophy, pedagogy, psychology, cognitive anthropology and exact sciences. The result is that, under the influence of the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor, numerous researchers are now interested in investigating the working of metaphor in various languages and socio-cultural systems all over the world. A few examples of such investigations are offered below.

Due to their role as facilitators in the process of understanding the world around us, metaphors are studied even in domains characterized by rigour and accurate expression, and I will refer here to the case of mathematics. Numerous studies on the use of metaphor in mathematics start from the idea that metaphors represent tools for identifying and understanding people’s perceptions towards mathematics. Latterell and Wilson (2017), for instance, study the individuals’ “mathematical identity” by comparing metaphors for mathematics from elementary preservice teachers to metaphors created by secondary preservice teachers. They find that elementary preservice teachers describe mathematics as an ongoing struggle in which the mathematics is active and they are the victims, while the secondary preservice teachers describe mathematics as an ongoing struggle in which they are active. Another line of research on metaphor in mathematics is based on the assumption that metaphors can contribute to the better understanding of the mathematical concepts. An influential study in this respect is that of Lakoff and Núñez (2000), who, starting from the observation that most fundamental mathematical ideas are metaphorical in nature, set out to explore the metaphors used in the language of mathematics with a view to promoting a truly scientific understanding of mathematics, one which is based on processes common to any kind of human cognition. The two researchers find that people create arithmetic by means of four different metaphors that create an abstract conceptual space starting from various interactions with the real world: object collection, object construction, the measuring stick, and moving along a path. Adopting a similar perspective, Frățilă and Jumanca (2011) discuss a number of conceptual metaphors used by teachers as means of explaining difficult mathematical issues to secondary and high school pupils. Their study reveals, for instance, that, in metaphorical terms, a circle is a thread arranged in a circular shape, an equation is a pair of scales in equilibrium, a mathematical function is an engine which turns fuel into motion, and, in a fraction chain whose limit tends to zero, the numerator and the denominator are competing runners. It can be concluded that, regardless of the

assumption from which it starts, the analysis of the metaphors in this field is ultimately meant to improve the process of teaching and learning the difficult and abstract mathematical concepts and ideas.

Researchers have also been interested in the use of conceptual metaphors in a wide range of medical conditions. For instance, a study by Coll-Florit, Climent, Sanfilippo and Hernández-Encuentra (2021) analyses the conceptual metaphors of depression in a corpus made up of blogs written by people suffering major depressive disorder. The metaphorical constructs that were identified correspond to three broad domains related to mental health: metaphors of depression, metaphors of interpersonal communication and social context, and metaphors of medicine and professional treatment. Some findings indicate that life with depression is generally conceptualized by means of two main source domains, “war” and “journey”, with a predominance of war metaphors. Surprisingly enough, medicine is conceptualized as a repressive power, and the doctor as a prosecutor or as a captor that locks the individual with depression into a diagnosis. As the researchers themselves point out, the analysis of these metaphors can deepen one’s understanding of mental health and can enhance communication between patients and doctors.

Another scientific field that regards metaphors as valuable tools for interventions is that of psychology. An interesting contribution comes from Dooremalen and Borsboom (2010), who signal the abundance of metaphors that are used in psychological conceptualization and explanation (e.g., the metaphor of the brain as a computer, or the thermometer metaphor in psychological measurement), but stress that “metaphors are untrue” (idem: 121), and, consequently, they should be used only as heuristic devices in the process of generating testable hypotheses and developing psychological theories. Fetterman and Robinson (2014), among many others, demonstrate the usefulness of metaphors as heuristic devices. In an article which reviews a series of projects focused on the link between metaphor and personality, the two authors conclude that metaphors matter in what makes people different from one another. Among the numerous examples that they mention, there is a study which shows that people who prefer the red colour score higher in interpersonal hostility than the blue-preferring individuals, or one which correlates the place where people locate the self – in the heart or the head – with whether those people are logical or emotional, friendly or distant, smarter or less smart, etc.

The usefulness of the metaphor has been also acknowledged in the social sciences, especially in relation to organizations and their management. Mention must be made of Gareth Morgan’s (1986/2006) seminal book, *Images of Organization*, which “offers scholars and students a comprehensible overview of organization theory and a set of diverse perspectives to guide research” (Örtenblad, Putnam and Trehan 2016: 876). Starting from the idea that all organization and management theory is based on metaphor, Morgan proposed a set of eight different metaphorical views of organizations: machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, instruments of domination. These metaphors provide a multidimensional view of the organizational life, and, consequently, suggest new ways of managing and designing organizations.

I cannot end the illustration of the possible investigations on metaphor without making reference to education, a field in which metaphors have been long acknowledged as useful tools by teachers and as interesting objects of study by researchers. For instance, in a study on the relationship between teaching and learning, Badley and Hollabaugh (2012) explore three clusters of metaphors:

transmission, facilitation, and catalyst metaphors. Some years later, Littlemore (2017) provides an overview of the research focused on the role played by metaphor in a range of educational contexts, and identifies two ‘hot topics’ in the field of metaphor and educational discourse: the extent to which the use of metaphor can actually shape and influence thinking, and the variation in metaphor use across different genres. More recently, conceptual metaphor is approached by the field of ecolinguistics and the ecology of language learning, where the class of students is seen as an ecological community embedded in an ecological environment (cf. Dragoescu Urlica and Stefanović 2018: 542-544).

I have mentioned just a few studies here, but I consider that they create a good image of the complexity that characterizes metaphor, and, implicitly, of the array of research opportunities that it presents. Moreover, the reference to various research studies focused on metaphor is meant to prepare the ground for the presentation of my own study in this respect. As pointed out earlier, the main purpose of the present paper is to study the metaphors used by Romanian young people when expressing their perceptions of the European identity and when explaining the manner in which Romania’s European membership affects them at both the social and the individual level. The analysis of the information offered by my subjects is made in the framework of the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor described and illustrated in this section. The main findings of my study, as well as some implications that these findings might have from social and pedagogical perspectives is described in detail in the following section.

3. Metaphors regarding the European Union: a research perspective

The metaphorization of various aspects specific to the European Union is a very frequent practice, as demonstrated by the politicians’ speeches, by the media discourse or by the legal-administrative documents of the European Union. Expressions like “multi-speed Europe” or “variable geometry Europe” are already acknowledged as standard references to the differences between the various member states and to the necessity of dealing properly with these differences. The usefulness of metaphors in this context has been acknowledged for a long time. For instance, Judge (1991) suggested that a dynamic system of metaphors can provide a better understanding of the complexity and the subtleties characterizing the European identity. In his view, a good strategy for creating the image of the European Union would be to use a system of metaphors based on familiar concepts, such as an ecology of options, a physiology of interdependent organs, a nuclear fusion reactor, an organic molecule of variable geometry, a pattern of circulating traffic or a crop rotation cycle.

Metaphors referring to the European Union have also been approached in numerous research studies. Hülse (2006) starts from the role of metaphors as means of imagining and, at same time, constructing social reality, and discusses five conventional metaphors of the EU enlargement: as a family reunion, as homecoming, as growing together, as a path, and as entry into a house. As a reaction to a more recent situation, Isentyeva (2019) analyses the metaphors occurring in the British right-wing press as strategies for constructing the idea of Europe in the light of the changing social and political situation determined by the Brexit referendum. The author mentions “death of Europe”, “Europe as suicidal” and “relationship with Europe as a (broken) marriage” as the most creative, and, at the same time, the most negative metaphors.

However, metaphors regarding a united Europe occur not only in public documents, but also in the common people's language, as my study demonstrates. The study starts from the following hypothesis: by projecting the meanings of a familiar issue onto a less familiar or abstract one, the metaphor is an important means by which people understand and express their reactions to a wide range of realities of the surrounding world. In line with the view of cognitive linguistics, which presents metaphorical language use as a reflection of the way people think, I consider that the metaphors used by my students represent valuable information, because they do not only signal the students' way of thinking and their attitudes towards the European Union and the European identity, but can also be of use to the authorities that contribute to the shaping and the development of the young people's European identity.

3.1. Research methodology

As a data collection instrument, I used a questionnaire, which was applied, between October 2018 and June 2021, to 108 students in the MA of Theory and Practice of Translation, organized by the West University of Timișoara. The respondents offered their answers in writing. The questionnaire included two open-ended questions:

1. How would you describe Romania's status as a member state of the European Union? Mention both positive and negative aspects, offering relevant details and examples;
2. What does the European identity mean to you personally? Mention both positive and negative aspects, offering relevant details and examples.

After collecting the answers from the 108 subjects, I started the process of data analysis. This process involved two stages. In the first stage, which had a preliminary character, I analysed my students' answers with a view to identifying instances of metaphorical use of language. More exactly, I was interested in finding out the percentage of subjects whose answers provided at least one metaphor in the natural course of communication, no matter if that metaphor referred to their European identity, or to Romania's status as an EU member state. At this preliminary stage, the analysis was made in quantitative terms and revealed that 41 of my students, namely 38% of the total number of subjects, resorted to metaphors when they completed the questionnaire.

For the second stage of my research study, I focused only on the answers offered by the 41 subjects identified earlier, and I performed an analysis of the metaphors used by them. Since my intention was not to make statistics, but just to reflect a certain reality, I used techniques specific to the qualitative type of research. The students did not provide their answers anonymously, but their names are not revealed in the discussion of the research findings. Therefore, I indicate the authors of the examples offered in this paper by means of codes consisting of numbers from 1 to 41.

The main findings resulted from the analysis of my subjects' answers are presented and discussed in what follows.

3.2. Findings

The analysis of the metaphors expressing my students' perceptions of their own European identity, on the one hand, and of our country's European

membership, on the other, was made in the terms proposed by cognitive linguists. This analysis revealed that the target domain represented by “the Romanians as European citizens” is correlated with four source domains.

3.2.1. A still developing body

The analysis of the data collected by means of the questionnaire indicates that, in some students’ view, Romania has not reached its full potential as an EU member, but the situation is likely to change in time. However, there are relatively few respondents who hold an optimistic view of EU as a place which offers proper conditions for this frail body to get bigger and stronger. Thus, some students describe their European identity as a “new-born baby” (27), “a child that needs to grow” (19), or “a blooming bud” (31). On the same line of reasoning, Romania’s status is seen as a “younger sister in the EU family” (3) or as an “explorer in a heaven yet to be discovered” (11).

In spite of this idealistic image of EU, my students mention that it is other people that have to make the important decisions for this helpless creature. This idea is presented in a negative light by other subjects, as the next categories of metaphors indicate.

3.2.2. The obedient subordinate

A great number of students describe their European identity as being marked by lack of individuality. Thus, they confess that they feel like “a drop in the ocean” (17) or “a fish in the ocean” (23) in order to signal that they do not really consider themselves to count very much as European citizens. Similarly, Romania’s European membership is described as “a flock of sheep” (21, 38), which obediently follows its shepherd, as a “slave”, because “they are our master, we have nothing else to do but obey” (14), or as an “ox” (33), which needs to be led and told where to go.

In spite of all the aid and the guidance offered by the EU authorities, some subjects feel that, judged in the European context, our country is “a fish out of the water” (1) or a “lost people in the world” (7), expressing their worry that we are not familiar with the new obligations, and we are not fully prepared for the new standards imposed on us.

3.2.3. The nonentity

There are also respondents who take the idea of subordination to the extreme and consider that their European identity or Romania’s EU membership are of no importance in the context of the united Europe. They refer to themselves or to Romania with nouns and phrases like “doormat” (28, 37), “ghost” (5) or “shadow in the crowd” (20), expressing their opinion that we are invisible to the rest of Europe. One subject perceives Romania’s membership to this supranational structure as a threat to his/her own national identity and explains that “EU is the sword and mace that will destroy any individuality” (18).

Some subjects express similar views, but are not so harsh in their formulations, and refer to Romania as Europe’s “Cinderella” (9, 26) or the “third wheel” (of a cart) (13).

3.2.4. The beneficiary

In some of my students' view, the European Union represents "a pool of opportunities" (10, 32) that the inhabitants of the member states can take advantage of. In this context, they perceive their European identity in terms of the benefits they have as a result of our country's status as an EU member state. This idea is rendered by images of the European Union as "a dream come true" (41), "an open door" (25), or even "a finance company" (12). One respondent described his/ her European identity as a "backup system", explaining that, "in case things go wrong in Romania, there are other countries to move to" (8). Even in this case, there are metaphors that reflect a deprecatory attitude: Romania is "a poor relative" (16) among the other European countries, and the European identity allows us to "sit down at the same table with the rich" (35).

In very general terms, the results of my study indicate that Romanian young people tend to have rather negative perceptions of Romania's European integration and their status as EU citizens. However, an in-depth interpretation of these findings is provided next.

3.3. Interpretation

The interpretation of my research findings is made according to three main perspectives on metaphors, formulated under the influence of the various approaches of both theoretical and research nature, discussed in section 2.

The first perspective is determined by the cognitive linguists' claim that metaphor starts from a relatively abstract or unstructured idea and connects it to a more concrete, better-known entity. The mere fact that my subjects use metaphors when referring to their European identity or to Romania's status as an EU country indicates that they perceive such issues as being unfamiliar to them, and even somehow remote from their sphere of interests. Moreover, the negative connotations frequently carried by these metaphors may be interpreted as the symptom of a certain fear of the unknown, of emotion experienced by people in the absence of sufficient and relevant information on a particular topic. The metaphors used by my subjects are actually manifestations of their tacit knowledge or interpretations of EU-specific issues, which can be assessed and exploited by the initiators of such research studies as this.

The second perspective involves the claim that context, understood in a broad sense, plays an essential role in the process of metaphor production. The age of the subjects, their (lack of) formal training in EU issues, their personal experience with the effects of Romania's integration within the European Union, their (lack of) personal transnational experiences are all factors that influenced my students' manner of metaphorsing the EU issues. This is how we can explain that, in spite of the common cultural background, some of my students perceive the European identity as a threat for their national identity, while others see the opportunities created by this supranational identity. Of course, it can be claimed that such metaphors are influenced by some objective factors (for instance, Romania's image in Europe), but I consider that the personal factors (that is, the amount of information, the type of experiences so far) play a more important part.

The third perspective, which has been partly anticipated by the first two, is related to the view of metaphors as tools that help towards the improvement of a certain practice. In the case of this study, metaphors can be used in the process of

shaping the young people's European identity. According to Royuela and López-Bazo (2020), the development of a collective identity involves two main mechanisms: information and experience. Professionals from various institutions and organizations, such as educators, sociologists, or political scientists, can interpret such metaphors, and then decide on a course of action that effectively contributes to raising the young people's awareness with regard to EU issues, and, if possible, even to creating opportunities for experiences (for instance, opportunities of personal contact with Europeans from other countries). And it is my strong belief – a belief, which, in fact, lies at the very heart of my study – namely that, with effective educational practices, the people's attitudes can change.

4. Conclusion

In spite of the fact that metaphors depend very much on the individual reality of the person who uses them, and, therefore, are characterized by a certain degree of subjectivity, they are useful in communication because they reveal what lies beyond words. More specifically, metaphors share meaning that is very closely related to the people's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs, as individuals and as participants in social life. And, as already mentioned in this paper, the information inherent in any metaphor is valuable, as it can be used both as a means of understanding reality, and as a means of creating it.

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