



Research Article

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Didactic Aspects of Figurative Syntagms in the Teaching Process

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Abstract

In the discursive process, figurative phrases with high expressive intensity are frequently used, representing one of the various sources of expression for each speaker in different communicative contexts. However, due to their nature, their teaching at school presents some difficulties. Although they are understandable to a particular linguistic community, they can be incomprehensible or difficult to interpret for anyone learning a foreign language, since their first meaning is in many cases not the meaning of the words that compose them and can be very different from the meaning they acquire in an idiomatic context. Idiomatic expressions rarely have corresponding translations in different languages, and their meaning is often rendered by completely different passages that have nothing in common with their direct meaning. In this article, we have tried to point out some of the methodological aspects to be considered when analyzing texts for didactic purposes and in foreign language teaching when it comes to figurative expressions. Since figurative phrases express a part of a nation's culture, it is important for students to recognize the syntactic structures as words come together in the discursive process to express and convey thoughts and become part of various meaningful and formal grammatical relationships. They should be learned and acquired by keeping in mind the characteristics of their different types, their density, and their pragmatic use in the respective linguistic community. In this study, we will also try to show that the study of figurative syntagma can shed more light on theories of foreign language acquisition. Previous studies on figurative syntagma in Albanian have mainly been conducted within the narrow confines of linguistics, especially traditional linguistics. We assume that their investigation in the context of language didactics, as we approach it here, is only a first step that needs to be completed and deepened in further and more comprehensive studies.

Keywords: syntax, didactics, figurative syntagm, linguistic community

1. Introduction

It is well-known that the main function of language is communication, providing facts of reality. To fulfill this function, words must be used in their direct and syntactically linked meanings, to avoid as much as possible their semantic confusion, ambiguity, etc. However, in everyday communication,

figurative expressions are used with a high expressive intensity.

Studies have shown that figurative speech is not so distinguishable from direct speech and that figurative speech is as easily understood as direct speech. Therefore, figurative language does not only belong to poets and writers.

Language research has shown the significant role of figurative language not only in literary discourse but also in everyday language (Rasan, R 1989), (Cacciari C., Levorato M. C., 1989). Such research shows an elevated level of use of figurative language in everyday life.

As a result, figurative language is no longer seen as a typical element of poetic discourse, but also as an instrument of human thought. However, if we look at the Albanian language didactics literature, we notice that it has not fully acknowledged the importance of figurative language in teaching foreign languages.

Texts and methods for teaching foreign languages neglect figurative language, often limiting themselves to their translation. Tasks focused on the figurative language are almost absent in didactic texts, without giving due attention to theoretical-methodological treatment.

Figurative phrases are examined in their entirety without considering diverse types, frequency of usage, etc., thus not being regarded as an important aspect of the language lexicon. Therefore, the study of figurative speech is seen as a secondary aspect with little connection to language.

2. Literature Review

The didactic aspects of figurative syntagma play a decisive role in language teaching, especially in foreign language teaching. Methodological considerations, pedagogical implications and their contributions to language learning theories underline the importance of integrating figurative language teaching into language curricula. By applying learner-centered approaches, fostering a supportive learning environment, and embedding instruction in authentic cultural contexts, teachers can effectively promote learners' acquisition of figurative language skills.

Figurative language, characterized by non-literal expressions and nuanced meanings, poses a major challenge in the teaching and learning process, especially in the context of second language acquisition. This literature review aims to examine the didactic aspects of figurative syntagma, focusing on methodological considerations, pedagogical implications and their role in theories of foreign language acquisition.

In order to understand the didactic aspects of figurative syntagma, the methodological approaches to language teaching need to be carefully examined. Traditional methods often emphasize the teaching of literal meanings and grammatical rules, overlooking the complexity of figurative language (Gibbs Jr., 1994). More recent research, however, argues for a communicative and contextual approach in which learners engage with authentic texts and real-life conversations to understand the pragmatic use of figurative language (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001).

In addition, incorporating multimodal instructional strategies, such as visual aids, multimedia resources, and contextualized activities enhances learners' ability to grasp the nuances of figurative language (Kormos & Kiddle, 2013). By designing instruction and providing meaningful contexts for exploration, educators can effectively promote the acquisition of figurative language skills (Cameron, 2003).

The effective teaching of figurative syntagma requires a pedagogical shift towards learner-centered approaches that respond to individual needs and preferences (Crespo-Fernández, 2019). Adaptive teaching techniques such as task-based learning and project-based activities allow students to explore and experiment with figurative language in authentic contexts (Ellis, 2003).

Moreover, fostering a supportive learning environment where students feel encouraged to take risks and make mistakes is essential for the acquisition of figurative language (Pulido, 2004). By encouraging a growth mindset and providing constructive feedback, teachers can promote learners' confidence and competence in using figurative language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

The study of figurative syntagma contributes to broader theories of foreign language acquisition

by shedding light on the interplay between language, culture and cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Cognitive linguistic theories emphasize the embodied nature of metaphorical thinking, where abstract concepts are anchored in sensorimotor experiences (Schmidt, 2010). By integrating figurative language instruction into language curricula, educators can promote learners' cognitive development and cultural competence (Coulson, 2001).

In addition, sociocultural theories emphasize the role of social interaction and cultural immersion in language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). Figurative language serves as a gateway to cultural understanding and enables learners to navigate the socio-pragmatic conventions of the target language community (Pavlenko, 2006). By embedding figurative language in authentic cultural contexts, educators can promote learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this research paper employs a qualitative approach. Given the nature of the topic, which delves into pedagogical considerations and educational practices, qualitative methods such as literature review, case studies, and classroom observations are employed to explore the complexities of teaching and learning figurative language.

4. Discussion on the Findings

4.1 Understanding the structure of figurative phrases during the teaching process

4.1.1 Structure of figurative phrases

The figurative meaning is minimally realized at the level of the phrase. Here we use the term 'phrase' in the same sense as it is used in Western linguistics, as (Memushaj, R:2008) notes, namely as a broad concept corresponding to an undefined unit of size. We will not only examine the expressions referred to as phraseological expressions by Albanian linguistics.

As far as their structure is concerned, they usually consist of **two elements**. They can be noun + noun joined by a preposition, determiner or attribute, noun + adjective joining a verb invoker with a noun or pronoun in the syntactic function of the main verb or invoker, etc. For example: "lonely ship", "waves of thoughts", "silent mountains", etc.

As already mentioned, figurative relations are more often established by linking two lexical units. However, the figurative structures of an expression can also involve **more than one syntactic relation**. Most commonly, these are two syntactic relations, such as subject + verb + object, subject + verb + complement, etc. These two relations can both be figurative, or one can have a direct relation.

1. **Subject + Verb + Object**
Era përkëdhelte pemët.
2. **Subject + Verb + Prepositional Phrase**
Zemra iu mbush plot me lumturi.
3. **Subject + Verb + Complement**
Sytë i digjeshin nga lumturia.
4. **Verb + Direct Object + Prepositional Phrase**
Kishin mbushur zemrat me shpresë.

4.1.2 Figurative competence

"In language didactics we have a thorough account of the nature and development of what Levorato calls figurative competence (Levorato M. C., 1993). This refers to the ability to understand and produce figurative structures that enable speakers to understand 'correct' language that is considered direct.

It is known that in the linguistic-cognitive development of the child, the competence for figurative language increases through a gradual process of acquisition. The ability to grasp the figurative meaning of what is said requires a range of linguistic and meta-linguistic skills. Thanks to such competence, the child can recognize the figurative value.

The process of forming competence in figurative language begins at around 4-5 years of age and develops in a multi-stage process in five different stages. After the first stage, in which the object and the word that designates it are inseparable and form a unit (stage 0), the child begins to separate the word from the referent by associating a name with a sign, thus developing the first stages of symbolic function that enable the first stages of processing the conceptual system. In this phase, the strategies for understanding statements are limited to direct analysis.

In the second phase, around the age of 7-8, the child can take another important step (Cacciari C., Levorato M. C., 1989). They are now able to abandon the narrowly referential and direct analysis of the text and begin to use logical reasoning strategies to arrive at a coherent understanding of the text. This is an important step in which the semantic component plays a fundamental role. It is precisely because of the initial development of the ability to understand at the semantic level that the child is able to construct a coherent understanding of the text by using the information it contains without resorting to direct analysis. The third phase, around the age of 9-10, corresponds to the discovery and subsequent awareness that an expression does not necessarily have a direct meaning, but that the latter is only one possibility for the coherent formation of the understanding of the text. This is a prerequisite necessary to understand idiomatic expressions. On the one hand, at this stage, attention is focused more on content than on form, more on meaning than on narrow meaning; on the other hand, figurative language becomes a means by which speakers can achieve their communicative goals and understand those of their interlocutors. In the fourth stage, the child can recognize and use idiomatic expressions, but now the degree of awareness is crucial.

Metalinguistic awareness is only reached in the fifth stage, in which the ability to interpret the meaning of idiomatic expressions based on acquired knowledge and logical conclusions develops. At this stage, a child can process meaning both by analyzing figurative expressions per se and with the help of contextual clues.

So, we see that the understanding of figurative language is gradual and describes diverse levels. However, at the levels described, there may be subjective differences in the cognitive nature and objective differences related to the morphosyntactic aspects of figurative expressions, which may interfere with acquisition and bring about changes.

When learning foreign languages, it is good to provide figurative structures in as many different understandable contexts as possible. For example, the expression "**ecte me kryet përjetë**" can have different meanings depending on the context: "proud" and "arrogant".

Traditionally, figurative expressions are taught in a decontextualized way, with a simple explanation or, if possible, with a corresponding figurative form in the learner's native language.

4.2 Acquiring Figurative Syntagms

The acquisition of idiomatic expressions is not an effortless process. This is why learners encounter difficulties when learning a foreign language. Structures that express idiomatic meanings rarely have exact translations in other languages, and their meaning is often conveyed by completely different expressions that have no direct connection to their literal meaning. For example, the expression "*vë në lojë*" in Albanian is translated into English as "*to pull somebody's leg*", whose literal translation "*to pull someone's leg*" has no idiomatic value, while in Italian there is a similar expression "*in bocca al lupo*" with a different meaning that does not correspond to the Albanian expression. One can imagine that the meaning of these unique structures causes serious problems when learning foreign languages where the learner only comes into contact with the language during lessons.

4.2.1 Semantic ambiguity

When learning these structures, attention is also paid to the semantic ambiguity of some of them, such as **“u zunë për mustaqet e Çelos”**, **“i bëj bisht bisedës”**, etc., which are semantically more obscure and less comprehensible than expressions such as **“pemët çlodhen”**, **“e kam vaj”**, etc., which can be understood more easily because of the meaning of the words that make them up. Structures such as **“biseda u ëmbëlsua”**, **“shekujt plaken”**, **“mbetem me gojë hapur”**, **“shqyej sytë”**, etc. are understandable because they are easy to visualize in the mind as they reflect typical manifestations of certain feelings.

Figurative phrases have words that are frequently used or not. In the phrase **“me tesha e kotesha detyrohej”**, for example, we have the word “tesha”, which is used less frequently than its synonyms “rroba” (clothes) and “plaçka” (rags), while “kotesha” is a very unfamiliar word and is unlikely to survive outside this context.

Some figurative expressions possess thus clear semantics, while others can only be understood if the figurative meaning is known. For someone who has just started to learn Albanian, expressions such as **“e bëri peshk”** or **“ka lindur me këmishë”** are not semantically clear, so the figurative meaning must be known, while expressions such as **“mal me mall”** or **“uria e mallit”** have greater semantic clarity and their meaning can be easily inferred from the context in which they occur.

If there is a correspondence between different languages, a translation from one language to another may be possible, e.g. **“thyej akullin”** (Albanian) corresponds to “rompere il ghiaccio” (Italian), “romper el hielo” (Spanish), “break the ice” (English), etc., but this cannot be said if there is only a partial similarity or a direct difference in meaning in the figurative meaning. When students learn the meaning of a new idiomatic expression, they immediately look for the matching expression in their native language, and this can be a source of clarification.

Other expressions, such as **“i jap dorën”**, **“ngre zërin fort”**, etc., have a direct meaning that is replaced by a metaphorical meaning in certain contexts. In this case, the context is essential to grasp the figurative meaning.

4.2.2 Contextuality

As already mentioned, the presentation of figurative phrases in context is important because this is the only way to clarify their meaning, which is not based on morphosyntactic rules but on rules of usage. Language didactics has always focused on the logical structure of language and the transparent representation of facts of reality. To achieve this, it must use words in their usual meaning and in regular syntactic contexts described in grammar rules, avoiding as far as possible ambiguity, uncertainty, etc. The basis of this discourse is precisely this direct use of language.

While figurative language goes beyond its logical structure, traditional studies rely on linguistic competence rather than communicative competence. However, as Langacker (1999) points out, figurative language is pervasive and fundamental in language, and if eliminated, we would be left with little. Therefore, it should be considered as a natural and expected phenomenon, not a problematic one.

We know that figurative expressions are also a linguistic richness, because anyone can express pre-existing concepts, but also create new reflections of the world in their own idiolect through semantic “deviations” that make the sentence surprising, intriguing, and attention-grabbing.

In observing comprehensive school textbooks, we have noticed that figurative expressions are taken out of context, which is useful for memorizing the meaning, but not at all helpful when using them. They are usually listed at the end of the lesson topic with the appropriate translation, for example:

Table 1:

Albanian	English
<i>I dha dum bisedës</i>	S/He found the beginning and solved the conversation.
<i>Ha re tjetri.</i>	It's very good
<i>Më ka ardhur uji në mulli.</i>	I am doing well; things are going smoothly for me.

Teaching figurative language structures through communicative and entertaining activities also makes it possible to encourage students to engage in this process. Figurative expressions that students encounter in various school or extracurricular activities, such as listening to songs, watching TV or reading magazines, can be noted down and discussed in class. This approach we have chosen has proved fruitful in creating a certain metalinguistic awareness that can help students. In the case of a high-density expression, it is also important that the student knows how appropriate it is for the situation and the language register. There are figurative expressions that belong to informal or colloquial language and are not suitable for formal language use.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we have attempted to investigate the process of comprehension and acquisition of figurative expressions by foreign language learners. We have opted for such a didactic perspective because we are convinced that following the process of acquiring figurative structures in the native language will also help to improve the methods used to teach them to foreigners.

In contrast to the past, there is now a growing belief that figurative meanings are widespread in language, so much so that there are scholars who claim that all language is figurative. Therefore, this study claims that figurative structures are an essential element of foreign language learning in general.

This paper also shows that the study of figurative idioms can shed more light on the theories of foreign language teaching.

Previous studies on idioms in the Albanian language area have been limited to traditional linguistics. The overview we offer here and its implications for language didactics should be further explored in broader studies.

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