Conceptualization, metaphor scenarios and interculturality in the sociocognitive and critical analysis of political and social phenomena

Tânia Gastão Saliés e Augusto Soares da Silva
interview Andreas Musolff

For this issue of *Matraga*, we had the pleasure to interview Professor ANDREAS MUSOLFF, a distinguished Research Professor of Intercultural Communication at the University of East Anglia, UK. He is considered one of the first scholars to research language communication within a cognitive linguistics, sociocultural/ discursive framework. In this effort, Musolff has promoted the synergy between Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, advocating for the cultural roots of metaphors and for social cognition. Developments and ramifications of his research may be found in several of the articles which constitute the present number (Mueles and Romano; Gonçalves-Segundo; Ferreira e Melo; Fernandes Gonçalves and Cavalcanti), attesting its productivity and relevance to current research in the field.

He has previously taught at the Universities of Düsseldorf and London and was a Visiting Fellow at the Truman Institute, Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Queen Mary University of London. He is a man of far-ranging intellectual interests who has demonstrated a remarkable talent for applying the concepts of Cognitive Linguistics to other fields of knowledge, including Political Science, Intercultural Communication, Philosophy, Historical Semantics, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Linguistics Anthropology, Pragmatics and Applied Linguistics. His most recent research explores competition metaphors in the context of COVID-19 (2022), metaphor use in political discourse cross-culturally (2021), language and racism (2019), and proverbs (2020) in everyday communication.

Professor Musolff has been as kind as to accept our invitation for this interview. His words will surely inspire critical reflection and research agendas that draw on a cognitive-discursive and sociocultural paradigm to understand contemporary themes.

Matraga | As one of the leading figures of the sociocultural-discursive turn in cognitive linguistics, you have published extensively on a broad range of topics, including, among others, the nature and functions of metaphor in discourse, the compatibility of Relevance Theory[1] with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the socio-pragmatic effects of figurative language use, political metaphors cross-linguistically, and the relation between metaphor and emotion. Given the wide range of your publications, the question arises as to how you became acquainted with Cognitive Linguistics in the first place and why did this approach appeal to you?

A. M.: I first read *Metaphors we live* by when I was an undergraduate student and was fascinated by it, both for its theoretical depth and its stylistic brilliance. Compared with the then still fashionable reconstruction of metaphor as an indirect speech act, the theory of experiential, body-based grounding seemed much more plausible as a model for the systematic inferencing that metaphors afford. The one main puzzle of CMT was (and still is) to me the talk of metaphoric "entailments"[2], which suggests a logical-deductive relationship that is in my view far too rigid too account for metaphoric implicatures.

Matraga | How did Conceptual Metaphor Theory and blending fit into the wider linguistic environment that you were also a member of especially intercultural communication?

A. M: Conceptual integration and Blending Theory are well suited to the analysis of figurative language uses that involve multiple, seemingly contradictory, and counterfactual input spaces. Such blendings are characteristic of Intercultural Communication, especially with regard to idioms and their creative variation across languages and cultures. In general, Intercultural Communication research shows that the assumption of "universality" of linguistic structures, including conceptual metaphors, is often unfounded and that culture-specific factors need to be taken into consideration for their motivation.

Matraga | In one of your articles (MUSOLFF, 2021a; 2021b), you mention that metaphors form clusters which group around certain political notions or trends giving origin to a "complex of blending effects." Could you elaborate on the idea and explain how it contributes to the analysis of discourse?

A. M.: In political discourse, all kinds of logically implausible blendings are possible; for example, the conceptualization of the Common European currency ("euro"), as *a child with eleven fathers,* or that of the *nation as a (living!) body without a head* (for instance, even after the deposing or even beheading of the *head* of state or government). Such counterfactual scenarios

---

[1] A cognitive-pragmatic approach that considers the expectations of relevance afforded by an utterance sufficient and accurate enough to guide interlocutors toward meaning construction, at a low processing cost and maximum cognitive effects (SPERBER; WILSON, 1995).

[2] Inferences in the frame that structures the target domain given the conditions and constraints placed on the frame in the source domain; entailments constitute anything that falls out from an understanding of a metaphor given the constraints on its frames.

do not invalidate the underlying conceptual metaphor, nor are they restricted by its source domain structures. The pragmatic context, as predicted by Relevance Theory provides sufficient clues for recipients to arrive at the fitting inferences.

Matraga | Turning back to the same question, would you then agree that metaphor theorists "need to go far beyond the usual focus on cross-domain mapping and inference transfer" as said by Turner and Fauconnier (2008) in one of their articles?

A. M.: I completely agree. Metaphor comprehension includes much more than a supposedly 'automatic' conceptual mapping and transfer.

Matraga | Taking cultural variation into consideration, recently you have also published on political metaphor cross-culturally (MUSOLFF, 2021b). Based on your findings, what does your research reveal about human conceptualization?

A. M.: My motivation for this research project originated in the observation of hidden diversity in metaphor comprehension across cultures. Sometimes what counts as metaphor in one culture is understood as literal in other cultures. Even a seemingly globally established metaphor such as *nation as body* is interpreted differently across cultural contexts, that is, the state as an anatomical body hierarchy, as body borders and contours of nations, as part of the Self's body (my nation is the blood in my veins) or as part of a larger body. These interpretation patterns are differentially represented in diverse national and linguistic cultures. Such findings are testimony to the creativity of human cognition, which does not work actively only in linguistic production but also in communicative reception.

Matraga | One of the key constructs introduced in this very same article includes "metaphor scenario". As an analytic tool, which would be its major advantages, and how does it compare to the concept of "context" and its relation to "discourse community" as introduced by Dell Hymes (1972)? Could you provide a specific example?

A. M.: The "metaphor scenario" category was constructed to capture narrative-argumentative patterns of source concepts that can be observed in larger corpora of political language focusing on specific target topics. In such cases, source concepts not only form highly specific selections from the source domain but combine to tell mini stories. Thus, *family* metaphors concepts in British debates about European politics clustered on *marriage* and *divorce* scenarios and *parent-children* relationships, and *body* metaphors for the nation state clustered on narratives that justified traditional hierarchical relationships ('head-down to-toe') or focused on interdependence ('the head needs the feet') as being essential for the *body's existence and health*. These recurring patterns all have an argumentative default bias (in favor of *family harmony*, *body health* etc.) and they are not identical with the larger source domains nor with individual concept-frames. Instead, they build projected "contexts" that are construed in the utterances by members of specific discourse

communities – and they depend for their comprehension on that communities' cultures (as I have mentioned before).

Matraga | Turning back to the notion of "scenarios", how does it throw light on the source and target domain dilemma? Let us provide a little bit of ground for this question. In one of your last papers (MUSOLFF, 2022), you claim that, according to CMT, in the PANDEMIC AS WAR metaphor, commonly used during the COVID-19 crisis, assumptions attributed to war would be mapped "onto a target domain of HEALTH POLICIES designed to mitigate and/or overcome the mass infection" (p.78). According to you, this might have framing effects that mislead the public and yield contra-productive consequences. Would you then say that metaphors attribute a structure to the target domain? Wouldn't there be a structure for HEALTH POLICIES, independent of the source domain war, capable of blocking these framing effects?

A. M.: Typically, metaphor target domains are relatively abstract, ill-defined and sometimes (for example, in political discourse) contested, and thus in need of metaphorical framing. At the purely conceptual-categorial level, such framing is provided 'in terms' of the source domain and its more or less prototypical lexical units (and their semantic relationships among each other) and accounts for the bulk of conventional and lexicalized metaphors that one can find in dictionaries and in routine language use that is not consciously processed as figurative (for instance, the TIME IS SPACE metaphor in European languages). By contrast, metaphor scenarios are discourse-based, pragmatically motivated frame clusters that form mini-stories with an evaluative bias serving argumentation or telling a mini-story. Knowledge of these scenarios is culture-specific: it enables recipients to recognize familiar scenarios quickly and also notice salient innovations.

Matraga | Recently, you co-edited a book on communicating COVID-19 and public health strategy (MUSOLFF et al., 2022). What approach to metaphor/metonymy can Cognitive Linguistics offer that is able to account for the vast range of phenomena it can apply to such as Public Health?

A. M.: The volume on *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse* edited by Ruth Breeze, Kayo Kondo, Sara Vila-Lluch and me has 27 chapters, ten of which focus on figurative language ranging from *war-, gender-* and *football*-related metaphors to the *virus-for-nation* metonymy implied in Trump's infamous "China virus" slur. In combination with Critical Discourse Analysis, Relevance theory and Stylistics, Cognitive Linguistics can elucidate the vast *functional* range of metaphor/metonymy, covering phenomena such as disease naming, science popularization and analogical reasoning that can be used both for informative and enlightening purposes as well as for creating fake news and motivating conspiracy narratives.

Matraga | Grounded cognition (BARSALOU, 1987), as we all know, is a combination of perception, memory, emotion, and action. Among these components, emotion has always been neglected in favor of a more reason-based cognition. What would you say to prospective cognitive linguistics

regarding the role of emotion in cognition? Could you, in your answer, elaborate on the concept of "emotionalization"?

A. M.: Emotionalization as a discourse phenomenon can be understood as the emphatic use of figurative language and of stylistic boosters, such as hyperbole, strongly evaluative, attitude-expressing and polemical lexis, including metaphor, but its cognitive aspects – conceptual as well as neurophysiological origins, structures and functions – are as yet little understood. Even less is known about emotion's influence on cognition in the emergence of meanings. Here lies one of the key-areas of future cognitive research.

Matraga | Another topic we would like to address is "metaphor reversal". Based on your research (2022), the erosion of trust in official communication is caused by hyperbolic government rhetoric that may further beliefs in conspiracy theories. How can the human mind be so easily manipulated by public discourse?

A. M.: If the public is continuously treated with hyperbolic rhetoric, black-white dichotomies and an underlying assumption of *argument as warfare*, commonsense-based 'discourse vigilance' as regards the plausibility and trustworthiness of politicians', scientists' and media statements is eroded. As a result, rational argumentation as a communicative aim is trumped by sensationalism, confirmation of prejudices and sheer entertainment value. This seems to me not to be so much a problem of gullible cognitive faculties but of responsible behavior of public voices who should reflect on the social consequences of their communicative actions.

Matraga | What is your opinion of Critical Metaphor Analysis? Do you think that this emerging framework can benefit from Conceptual Integration Theory?

A. M.: "Critical Metaphor Analysis" (coined by Jonathan Charteris-Black[3]) has already had an enormous influence on Applied Cognitive Linguistics for the past two decades and has been using Blending and Conceptual Integration Theory with great analytical success, especially when it comes to the investigation of sophisticated rhetorical exploitation of multiple-input and counter-factual reasoning. One of the exciting questions for its future development is the experimental testing of its hypotheses about metaphor reception, that is, qualitative and quantitative operationalization of suspected manipulation phenomena, the replicability of such experiments and self-critical scrutiny of its own methodological assumptions.

---

[3] Please refer to CHARTERIS-BLACK, J. *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230000612>. Access date: Apr. 03, 2023.

Matraga | Professor Musolff, you are fluent in various languages, do you consider that this fact might have had an influence on your understanding of meaning construction and intercultural communication?

A. M.: Everyone learning and/or using several languages encounters seemingly 'untranslatable' idioms, 'false friends' and diverse lexical and grammatical organization patterns that force them to rethink what they want to express. Even in contexts in which a supposedly internationally shared *lingua franca* (for example, contexts of English as a Foreign Language) is being used, such divergencies are omnipresent. In themselves, they are neither a linguistic nor a cognitive problem; on the contrary, they give rise to inspirational insights into creative aspects of cultural diversity and intercultural communication. They only become a 'problem' if, due to ideological and economic pressures, multilingualism, language transfer and intercultural discourse is downgraded, casualized or belittled as a mere technical issue of information flow.

Matraga | To conclude our conversation, which topics would you like to see included in a Cognitive Linguistics research agenda?

A. M.: As I have already mentioned, I see Cognitive Linguistics as a dynamic research field that engages with a range of 'applied' linguistic approaches such as Pragmatics, Discourse Studies, Stylistics, Socio- and Psycholinguistics, Emotion Studies as well as Contrastive Cross-cultural and Intercultural Communication Studies. In this way, its central insight in the cognitive structure and function of language can become socially relevant in a pushback against anti-humanistic tendencies in our society that denigrate rational communication and cultural diversity as superfluous or secondary to political and economic interests.

REFERENCES

BARSALOU, L. Grounded cognition. **Annual Review of Psychology**. v. 59, p.617-645, 1987. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093639>. Access date: Sep. 15, 2021.

FAUCONNIER, G.; TURNER, M. Rethinking metaphor. *In*: GIBBS, R. (Ed.), **Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 53-66.

HYMES, D. Models of the interaction of language and social life. *In*: GUMPERZ, J.J.; HYMES, D. (Eds). **Directions in sociolinguistics**: the ethnography of communication. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972, p. 35-71.

MUSOLFF, A. et al. (Eds.). **Pandemic and crisis discourse: Communicating COVID-19 and public health strategy**. London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

MUSOLFF, A. "World-beating" pandemic responses: ironical, sarcastic, and satirical use of war and competition metaphors in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. **Metaphor and Symbol**. v. 37, n.2, p. 76-87, 2022.

MUSOLFF, A. Hyperbole and emotionalization: escalation of pragmatic effects of proverb and metaphor in the "Brexit" debate. **Russian Journal of Linguistics**. v. 25, n. 3, p. 628-644, 2021a.

MUSOLFF, A. Researching political metaphor cross-culturally: English, Hungarian, Greek and Turkish L1-based interpretations of the Nation as Body metaphor. **Journal of Pragmatics**. v. 183, p. 121-131, 2021b.

MUSOLFF, A. How (not?) to quote a proverb: the role of figurative quotations and allusions in political discourse. **Journal of Pragmatics**. v. 155, p. 135-144, 2020.

SPERBER, D; WILSON, D. **Relevance: Communication and Cognition**. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.