

## Personification in Advanced EFL Learners' Dissertations from a Cognitive Linguistic Stance

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper offers a report of a research into some advanced EFL learners' use of personification in their dissertations in a higher education context; namely, Mouloud Mammeri University. Its main objective is to shed light on the extent of occurrence of this phenomenon in their writings. It also tries to elucidate the frequency of use of metaphoric verbs and suggest explanations for the observable fact. Therefore, the question raised is whether the examination of some dissertations would reveal an extensive use of personification. Relying on the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group 2007), three master's dissertations are examined and a quantitative analysis of the metaphoric verbs featuring students' writings is conducted.

The results of the study indicate that personification is highly used. Various reasons can explain this fact, such as, the desire to reduce subjectivity and attaining objectivity, among others. These findings can make a humble contribution to the field of education, as it might offer useful data to educational practitioners and researchers.

### **Key words:**

cognitive linguistics; personification; academic writing; EFL learners; higher education

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is defined as reasoning and talking about one conceptual domain in terms of the structure of another conceptual domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It has been argued that speakers of English draw on concrete domains in order to comprehend abstract concepts because thinking about difficult abstract concepts is facilitated by concrete physical concepts (Kövecses 2002). There seems to be an accepted reason that leads people commonly to build source-target conceptual mappings in order to attain an understanding of abstract concepts. This reason rests upon the connection between people's frequent physical experiences and the metaphorical correspondences they make to structure the abstract concepts they try to understand (Gibbs 1996). Metaphorical thought was described as normal and ubiquitous, leading to a spontaneous and unconscious act of metaphor use in ordinary everyday language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Metaphor is pervasive in both educational and academic discourse. This phenomenon has considerably attracted the attention of applied linguists because of its contribution to the understanding of human thought processes and communication (Cameron 2003; Cameron and Low 1999). Metaphor in EFL learners' writing needs to be researched, as Eubanks (2011: 13) argued "If we want to think more carefully about who writers are, what writing is, and how writing affects our lives, we should pay attention to our figurative language and thought." In higher education settings, such as Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou, EFL learners are most of the time involved in a spontaneous and unconscious process of metaphor use in academic written productions. This unconscious act constitutes an outstanding reason that stimulates thinking about the frequencies of metaphors use in text. To date, there seems to be no study that has explored the production of metaphors, particularly personification, in EFL learners' written discourse at Mouloud Mammeri University. An attempt to conduct such an investigation can be of interest to educators and researchers, as it may enlighten their understanding of EFL learners' use of metaphorically used expressions in text.

The main point behind the present research is to answer the question of whether personification metaphors are used in the three master's dissertations under study and to what extent. I suggest that a significant number of metaphors is produced in the written discourse in question; this goes in line with the argument made by scholars (see section 2 below). The objective of this paper is three-fold. First, it tries to show that personification importantly features students' writing. Second, it aims at revealing that the metaphorical lexical items in personification; namely, metaphoric verbs, are used at variable rates. Finally, it suggests explanations for the reasons lying behind the use of this type of metaphor.

This paper begins with a review of some pertinent studies about metaphor in educational and academic discourse. It then provides some background information about personification in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). Next, it introduces the methodology. Finally, the article analyses, discusses the results of the research, and draws some conclusions.

## 2. Studies into Metaphor in Educational and Academic Discourse

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphors are primarily conceptual not linguistic. They are viewed as tools that facilitate communication through the understanding of abstract concepts in terms of concrete ones (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 34). The relationship between the two types of concepts is guaranteed by *conceptual mappings*, i.e., correspondences between a source and a target domain, as shown in the figure below.



**Figure: Source-target domain mapping**

Studies into discourse have demonstrated the important part played by metaphor in structuring thought and language (Littlemore et al. 2014; Musolf and Zinken 2009; Cameron 1999; Gibbs 1999; Steen 1999). The ubiquitous nature of metaphors in spoken and written educational and academic discourse is an observed fact that has been vastly researched (Semino 2008; Cameron 2003; Cameron and Low 1999), as this issue gained significant importance in the field of education. Textbooks, for instance, are filled with countless metaphorical expressions, so often, unnoticed by students (Goatly 2007: 1). The importance of metaphor in foreign language teaching and learning has been importantly explored. Low (2008a) stressed the need to consider how metaphor is used at discourse level, and to determine what learners are required to do with metaphor. In addition, he acknowledged the difficulty of testing for 'metaphoric competence' in a foreign language. Metaphor has furthermore been researched in academic discourse with respect to book reviews (Low 2008b). An analysis of reviews revealed authors' regularity in metaphor use for positioning purposes.

In this paper, academic discourse is understood as being the spoken or written form of language produced in accordance with standards set within academic frameworks including higher education contexts. Low (1999: 231) calls these standards “norms of the academic community”. Understood in such terms, academic writing can be said to be represented by such instances of language production as advanced EFL learners’ written master’s dissertations. It is worth noting in passing that academic discourse has been found to be characterized by the highest amount of metaphorically used words (Steen et al. 2010a: 781). *Personification* is one of the commonly used metaphors in academic discourse.

A number of metaphor studies considered personification as a phenomenon that plays an important role in academic language (Low, 1999; Charteris-Black 2000; Charteris-Black and Musolff 2003; Darian 2000; Giles 2008; Goschler 2007; Pulaczewska 1999 Semino, 2008). An account of personification in Conceptual Metaphor Theory is provided in the forthcoming theoretical background section.

### 3. Personification in Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The present research falls within the scope of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and cognitive linguistic related work. CMT treats linguistic manifestations of metaphors in written discourse from a cognitive linguistic stance. That is, metaphors are first conceptual constructs existing in language users’ thoughts that are then given a more concrete form, as for example, metaphoric written words. Interest in the study of metaphor has emerged out of the necessity to apprehend its use and interpretation in order to contribute to an understanding of communication.

In Conceptual Metaphor Theory, *personification* is described as a process that “allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities.” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 33) It is a type of conceptual metaphor that “involves understanding nonhuman entities, or things, in terms of human beings. It thus imputes human characteristics to things.” (Kövecses 2002: 251) In other words, “this type [of metaphor] occurs when a nonhuman entity (referring to some discourse entity, such as a text) is the subject with a verb that requires a human agent.” (Steen et al. 2010a: 108) This is illustrated in example (1) hereafter.

(1) This chapter *discusses* participants’ pragmatic competence.<sup>1</sup>

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1- See Hadj Mohand 2019: 45.

The word *discusses* is used metaphorically in example (1) above. In fact, this verb requires an animate subject, but here, it co-occurs with the inanimate noun *chapter*. This example is illustrative of what Low (1999: 231) calls the ESSAY IS A PERSON metaphor that exemplifies personification.<sup>2</sup> The metaphorical word *discusses* in example (1) has been identified by means of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). A comparison of the contextual meaning of *discusses* and its basic meaning reveals that it is used metaphorically in example (1) above.

The ability to interpret metaphors in written discourse requires first the capacity to identify them with consistency and accuracy. The act of identifying metaphors in written discourse means that metaphorically used expressions are searched for in usage. The term “usage” refers to both text and talk, and is opposed to that of “grammar” (Steen 2007). It has been argued that metaphor identification is not a trouble-free task because of inconsistency in researchers’ intuitions associated with a lack of accuracy in determining what counts as a metaphoric expression (Pragglejaz Group 2007). As a result, a group of ten cognitive linguists specialized in conceptual metaphor research, and who called themselves the *Pragglejaz Group*, elaborated a method to facilitate the identification of metaphorically used words in natural discourse. They called this method the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). Steen et al. (2010b: 768) described this method as an inductive tool that requires “moving from the available linguistic structures towards a set of reconstructed conceptual structures that constitute cross-domain mappings...” This method is implemented in four steps. In the first step, the analyst ensures that the overall meaning of the discourse is understood. In the second step, he identifies the lexical units that he/she assumes to be metaphorical in the text in question. In the third step, he/she sets up their meaning in context; then, he/she searches for other basic concrete/bodily meanings in other contexts and decides whether the meaning in the text can be understood in terms of or in comparison with meaning that is more basic. If this is found to be right, the researcher marks the identified lexical units as being used metaphorically, in the fourth step. Later, a more elaborated form of MIP referred to as the MIPVU was introduced to deal with metaphors in news text and conversation as well as simile in academic discourse (Steen et al. 2010a). In the present paper, only the first version of MIP (2007) is applied to identify verbs that exhibit personification.

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2- Following conventions in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Conceptual metaphors are transcribed in small capitals (see Lakoff 1993).

## 4. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

In this section, I first describe the corpus on which the research was conducted along with the discourse sample including metaphorically used words indicating personification. Then, I present the method used in collecting the tokens of metaphorical linguistic expressions. Finally, I report on the quantification method adopted in the analysis of the findings.

The account of metaphors in students' academic writing was based on a corpus of 85260 words. To build up the discourse sample, metaphorical linguistic expressions displaying personification were collected from master's dissertations produced by three major students in 2018 and 2019, at the Department of English in Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou.<sup>3</sup> The procedure used to collect the tokens of metaphorical linguistic expressions was a simple search on the computer using a set of keywords: discuss, show, display, provide, highlight, explain, confirm, investigate, explore, involve, shed light, present, describe, deal, review, reveal, refer, indicate, introduce, allow, and represent. The literal were then separated from the metaphorical expressions. MIP was the method used in the identification of these metaphors. To compare the contextual meaning of the lexical units with their basic meaning, I referred to Cambridge Online Dictionary.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the basic meaning of the word "discuss" in the metaphorical expression "This chapter discusses the results of the investigation" was examined by referring to this dictionary. This has led to the classification of this metaphorical linguistic expression within the CHAPTER IS A PERSON metaphor.

To analyse the data, I relied on a quantification method. The quantitative analysis was conducted on a corpus comprising 515 identified metaphoric linguistic expressions exhibiting personification (see table in the section on results). The total number of words that made up the corpus was 85260. The results of the analysis were quantified in numbers and percentages and were displayed in the form of a table. The percentages were calculated by means of the percentage formula  $z\% = x * 100 / y$ . The symbol  $x$  represents the frequency of occurrence of identified metaphors, and  $y$  stands for the total number of identified metaphorically used words in the corpus; i.e., 515. The identified metaphors were calculated with respect to

3- See Hadj Mohand 2019; Mebarki 2019; Boudiaf 2018.

4- Cambridge Online Dictionary is available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>.

their types. That is, ontological metaphors based on personification were isolated from other types like journey, money, or spatial metaphors. In addition, verbs constituted the metaphorically used lexical items that were retained for analysis.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The results of the present investigation are supplied in a table revealing the rates of personification use in the three master's dissertations labelled A, B, and C. The 21 metaphorically used lexical items that were searched for in the corpus are arranged randomly on a column. The frequency of use of each item, e.g. "discuss", has been calculated within the three dissertations separately in order to compare the rates, then, a total was computed and a percentage was determined following the method described in the section on methods of data collection and analysis. This percentage revealed the frequency of use of each metaphorically used item in the whole corpus. The three outstanding metaphorically used verbs are classified following their rates. The discussion of these results is conducted with respect to the frequencies of metaphor use, and the variation in the rates of each prominent and less prominent metaphorically used verbs. An explanation of the causes of personification use is also debated. The discussion is based on the results displayed in the table hereafter.

Verbs	Number of tokens of linguistic expressions per dissertation			Totals and percentages
	A	B	C	
Discuss	10	7	7	24 (4.66%)
Show	10	28	21	59 (11.45%)
Display	5	2	0	7 (1.37%)
Provide	14	17	27	58 (11.26%)
Highlight	5	0	1	6 (1.16%)
Explain	2	3	0	5 (0.97%)
Confirm	6	2	0	8 (1.55%)
Investigate	3	7	4	14 (2.71%)
Explore	3	5	0	8 (1.55%)
Involve	9	18	18	45 (8.73%)
Shed light	3	1	2	6 (1.16%)
Present	8	12	16	36 (6.99%)
Describe	4	7	2	13 (2.52%)
Deal	17	4	17	38 (7.37%)
Review	2	3	3	8 (1.55%)

Reveal	15	13	16	44 (8.54%)
Refer	20	21	30	71 (13.78%)
Indicate	1	2	2	5 (0.97%)
Introduce	1	4	1	6 (1.16%)
Allow	13	12	19	44 (8.54%)
Represent	1	2	7	10 (1.94%)
Total				515 (100%)

Table: frequencies of metaphorically used verbs in personification

The analysis of the table above shows that the three most prominent metaphorically used verbs in the corpus come in the following order:

(1) Refer (2) Show (3) Provide

*Refer* is ranked in the first position with a rate of 71 occurrences making 13.78% of all the identified metaphors. A variety of metaphorical expressions involving the verb *refer* was produced in the three dissertations as an instantiation of the conceptual metaphor CONCEPTS ARE PEOPLE. This is illustrated in examples (2), (3), and (4) hereafter:

- (1) *This term refers to the individual's ability to understand and perform a given task appropriately and effectively.*
- (2) *Formulaic Competence refers to those words, expressions, collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs and fixed phrases used to facilitate communication.*
- (3) *High culture refers to all the artistic artifacts such as painting, classical music, and literature.*

The verb *show* comes in the second position. It occurred 59 times in the corpus, with a percentage corresponding to 11.45% of all the identified metaphors. This verb was involved in the linguistic manifestation of the conceptual metaphor RESULTS ARE PERSONS, as shown in examples (5), (6), and (7) below:

- (4) *The findings show that the techniques vary from one teacher to another.*
- (5) *The pre-test results show that only four (4) participants of each group used verbal fillers.*
- (6) *The results of the questionnaire show that many MS4 learners support the fact that there is a difference in the inclusion of intercultural contents in the two textbooks under study.*



The verb *provide* is found to be less used than *refer* and *show* and thus occupied the third position in terms of frequency with the rate 58 (=11.26%). This verb was used in metaphoric linguistic expressions of the conceptual metaphor THE CHAPTER IS A PERSON, as revealed in examples (8), (9), and (10):

(7) *This chapter provides a detailed description of the sample.*

(8) *This chapter provides some definitions of the term communicative competence.*

(9) *The General conclusion provides an overall summary of the main points that are tackled in the research.*

The least used verbs in the corpus are, on the one hand, *explain* and *indicate* with an equal rate of 5 (= 0.97%) for each, and on the other, *highlight*, *shed light*, and *introduce* with a frequency equating 6 (= 1.16%). This indicates that the metaphorically used verbs in personification manifested at variable rates throughout the corpus.

The aforementioned analysis has revealed that personification was largely used in the three dissertations. The 21 metaphorically used verbs that were searched in the corpus have led to the identification of 515 instances of personification in a corpus including 85260 words. This observed fact demonstrates the significant part played by personification in advanced learners' academic writing. A question rises here. That is, the reason why this phenomenon is overwhelmingly present in their written discourse. One reasonable answer would be that the authors of the dissertations were required to use a technique for one purpose; i.e., achieving modesty in academic scientific research. This is likely to keep distance *vis à vis* the text they produced, as Low (1999: 223) argued, "the production of expressions like **This essay thinks** is not so much the creation of animacy, but rather part of a strategy for avoiding or reducing subjectivity." That is, the person writing the dissertation is substituted by the dissertation or any part of it in order to create a kind of distance between himself/herself and the text.

However, other reasons may lie behind the use of personification. The students might have resorted to personification as a strategy to produce some greater impact, as it renders a non-human entity more vivid and lively through human attributes. Readers can easily understand the human traits and in turn, the non-living entities are described in a prominent and remarkable way that grabs the readers' attention. The use of this device enables the object, action, or concept that is personified, to connect with the readers, as it adds a deeper meaning to the piece of writing that makes them comprehend and remember the text.

## 6. Conclusion

The main issue raised in this research was whether personification metaphors were used in the three master's dissertations under study and to what extent. The findings revealed that personification importantly featured students' writing. This confirms the claim made at the outset of this paper; i.e., a significant number of personification metaphors is produced in the written discourse in question. The results also demonstrated that the metaphorically used verbs in personification have been produced with variable rates. Finally, the discussion of the findings has attempted to provide some plausible explanations for the causes that have led to the overwhelming use of personification in the three dissertations.

These conclusive statements, it must be pointed out, are confined to the present research and thus are not generalizable. In addition, the number of dissertations that have been analysed is very limited. In addition, only 21 metaphorically used verbs were searched in the corpus. A greater number of dissertations and verbs would have brought far-reaching data that would have been fruitfully exploited. Other issues need to be investigated to clarify the causes of learners' overwhelming use of personification in their writings. Therefore, further research is recommended on such matters as:

- Exploring students' awareness of metaphor use in their own written productions,
- Drawing learners' attention to metaphor manifestations in academic discourse,
- Teaching learners what metaphors are and how they can be used efficiently in written discourse,
- Familiarising teachers with the phenomenon of personification in academic discourse and training them to cope with it satisfactorily to help learners improve their writing.

Nonetheless, it can be hoped that this small-scale research has contributed with some useful information to the field of metaphor in educational and academic discourse within the cognitive linguistics trend that would be of interest to students, researchers, and educational practitioners.

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