

# The use of metaphor and metonymy in academic and professional discourse and their challenges for learners and teachers of English

*Jeannette Littlemore, Phyllis Chen, Polly Liyen Tang, Almut Koester and John Barnden*

## Abstract

This chapter reports on two studies that investigate the use of metaphor and metonymy in English-language discourse communities and identify some of the problems experienced by non-native speakers attempting to enter these communities. The first study looks at the use of metaphor in university lectures in Britain and the problems that this presents to international students attending those lectures. The main finding is that metaphors occur (the average metaphoric density is 4.1%) and that they create a range of comprehension problems that the students are not always aware of. The second study looks at the use of metonymy among staff at a day nursery and outlines the problems identified by a student of English working there as a part-timer. This case study shows that the established members of the nursery discourse community often use metonyms that are idiosyncratic to their community. Moreover, they are unaware that this kind of opaque language use forms a barrier for new entrants. Both studies are of relevance to teachers of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) who are preparing their students for entry into specific discourse communities.

*Keywords:* discourse communities; Language for Specific Purposes (LSP); metaphor; metonymy; comprehension

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two cognitive processes which lie at the heart of much human thought and communication: metaphor and metonymy (Gibbs 1994). In very basic terms, metaphor draws on relations of substitution and similarity, whereas metonymy draws on relations of contiguity. In metaphor, one thing is seen in terms of another and the role of the interpreter is to identify points of similarity, allowing us, for example, to describe economic competition as if it were physical combat. In metonymy, an entity is

used to refer to something that it is actually related to, allowing us to utter and understand statements such as “The City recoiled at the prospect,” where “The City” stands for the large financial organizations that are based in the City of London. Jakobson (1971) famously argued that metaphor and metonymy constitute two fundamental poles of human thought, a fact which can be witnessed through their prevalence in all symbolic systems including language, art, music, and sculpture. More often than not, metaphor and metonymy work together (Goossens 1990), and are so deeply embedded in language that we do not always notice them (Gibbs 1994). Languages vary both in terms of the extent to which, and the ways in which, they employ metaphor and metonymy, and this can have important ramifications for those endeavouring to learn or teach a second language. Both metaphor and metonymy work at a conceptual as well as a linguistic level (Cameron 1999). We can thus talk about conceptual and linguistic metaphor, and conceptual and linguistic metonymy.

To begin with metaphor, conceptual metaphors are cognitive structures that are thought to be deeply embedded in our subconscious minds (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), whereas linguistic metaphors are surface-level linguistic phenomena (Cameron 2003). Conceptual metaphors are thought to be acquired through our physical interaction with the world, through the way in which we perceive the environment, move our bodies, and exert and experience force. The conceptual metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS manifests itself in expressions such as “you have to *construct* your argument carefully,” “they now have a *solid weight of* scientific evidence” and “the pecking order theory *rests on* sticky dividend policy.” One of the most productive conceptual metaphors is the *conduit metaphor*, in which communication is seen as transfer from one person to another, allowing us to talk, for example, about *conveying information*, and *getting the message across*. Another conceptual metaphor, PROGRESS THROUGH TIME IS FORWARD MOTION, results in expressions such as *plan ahead*, *back in the '60s* and *to move on*. In the same way, an argument is often thought of in terms of warfare; understanding is often expressed in terms of seeing; love is often thought of in terms of a physical force; and ideas are often thought of in terms of objects.

Linguistic metaphors, as we pointed out above, are a surface-level phenomenon; unlike conceptual metaphors, the exact wording or the *phraseology* is an important part of the meaning. Decoding linguistic metaphors may involve accessing the relevant conceptual metaphor, but this will only help the decoder part of the way, and further processing, involving the use of context and phraseological patterning, is usually required to access the

intended meaning (Littlemore and Low 2006a). Languages vary both in terms of the conceptual metaphors they use and the linguistic manifestations of these metaphors. It has been found (Ferreira 2008) that by introducing universal conceptual metaphors, such as those involving the experiential domains of vision, motion and anger, teachers can help language learners to understand linguistic metaphors in the target language. Once these conceptual metaphors have been accessed, the skill on the part of the learner lies in identifying the ways in which they are exploited and elaborated in the target language. Thus an awareness of both conceptual and linguistic metaphor is likely to be advantageous for language learners.

As for metonymy, according to Cognitive Linguists, a small number of higher-order conceptual metonymies give rise to a wide range of metonymic expressions. For instance, the PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT conceptual metonymy gives rise to linguistic metonymies, such as the use of “Hoover” to refer to all vacuum cleaners. The AGENT FOR ACTION metonymy makes it possible for us to talk about “butchering a cow” or “authoring a book.” Other common types of conceptual metonymy include: PART FOR WHOLE metonymies, sometimes referred to as synecdoche (e.g., “Bums on seats,” where *bums* refers to students); WHOLE FOR PART METONYMIES (e.g., “The police turned up;” “Japan invaded Korea”); ACTION FOR COMPLEX EVENT metonymies (e.g., “Let’s get the kettle on” to refer to the act of making a cup of tea); CATEGORY FOR MEMBER metonymies (e.g., “the pill” to refer specifically to the contraceptive pill, or “I need a drink” which usually refers specifically to an alcoholic drink); member for category metonymies (e.g., “aspirin” for any painkilling tablet); DEFINING PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY metonymies (e.g., “the love interest” or “some muscle”); ACTION FOR OBJECT metonymies (e.g., “Can you give me a bite?”); POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR metonymies (e.g., “He married money” or “The suits wouldn’t approve”); and CONTAINER FOR CONTAINED metonymies (e.g., “Do you want a glass?”).

As with metaphor, there are limitations to the extent to which conceptual metonymy can help us to understand and explain the wide variety of linguistic metonymies that occur in everyday discourse, although it may give a rough indication of the more common types. Whether or not conceptual metonymies exist in any kind of rigid or “psychologically real” format is unknown, but there is certainly plenty of evidence of linguistic metonymy in everyday language, where it acts as a kind of shorthand, particularly amongst speakers who are very familiar with one another. Metonymy also appears to underlie the verbalisation of nouns. When nouns are transformed into verbs, there is often a metonymic focus on one feature of those

nouns, which allows the transformation to take place. For example, we might talk about “pencilling something in,” “legging it” or “elbowing someone out of the way.”

In many cases, metaphor and metonymy are so conventionalized that language users will not see them as being particularly figurative. For instance, few speakers of English would describe expressions such as “running through an agenda,” “looking over some documents” or “tabling a motion” as particularly figurative. For them, it is “just the way they say it.” However, for someone who is trying to learn a new language, or even someone who is a native speaker and is in the process of entering a new discourse community, metaphor and metonymy can be somewhat opaque. For instance, when people in business talk about “verticals” (to mean sectors), “ring-fencing” (limiting budgetary liability) and “ratchet-mechanisms” (economic systems that let prices go up, but not down), it may take a considerable amount of “figurative thinking” (Littlemore and Low 2006a, 2006b) to get from the basic senses of these words (that is, if the hearer is familiar with them) to their less tangible, figurative uses. In other words, the hearer may attempt to identify relations of substitution, similarity or contiguity between the basic senses of these words and the contexts in which they are used. Research has shown that, when language learners encounter usages such as these, this is indeed what they do, as in many cases they are familiar with a more basic sense of the word (Littlemore and Low 2006a, 2006b).

Of course, language learners face an additional challenge in that they also need to establish whether the expression is in general use, or whether it is peculiar to a particular discourse community. Thus, rather than asking whether or not a particular item is a metaphor or a case of metonymy, it is perhaps more useful to ask whether a particular item has the *potential* to be treated as such by a language learner, by a newcomer to that particular discourse community or by someone who is both at the same time.

A large amount of language teaching takes place in LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) contexts (Dudley Evans and St John 1998: 1-18). The challenge for language teachers working in these contexts lies in preparing their students for access to particular discourse communities and in helping them to understand and use the genres that are employed by those communities (Swales 1990). One of the defining features of a discourse community, according to Swales, is the fact that the language used by its members contains specific lexis, and it has been argued that this discourse-community-specific lexis tends to be rich in metaphor (Partington 1998). Indeed, Partington goes on to argue that the use of metaphor is a key defin-

ing characteristic of discourse communities. Several recent studies have indeed found that certain discourse communities tend to favour the use of certain metaphors. These include: the language of architects (Caballero 2006); educational discourse (Cameron 2003); business journalism (Koller 2004); politicians (Charteris-Black 2005), primary school discourse (Nerlich et al. 1999), and religious discourse (Charteris-Black 2004).

This suggests that it may be useful for LSP teachers to help their students to understand the particular metaphors that are used by the discourse communities they wish to enter. Before making claims such as this, however, we need to answer two questions: (a) Is the use of particular metaphors a distinguishing feature of discourse communities?; (b) Does it present problems to students attempting to enter those discourse communities? If the answer to these questions turns out to be affirmative, then there is an argument for an increased focus on metaphor in LSP syllabi. In addition, given the above discussion, it may also be worth asking whether metonymy features in discourse-community-specific lexis and whether or not its acquisition presents newcomers to the discourse community with problems. If so, like metaphors, also metonymies merit attention in the LSP classroom.

In this chapter, we report on two studies which attempt to answer these questions. The studies investigate the use of metaphor and metonymy in two different discourse communities and identify some of the problems experienced by language learners attempting to enter these discourse communities. The first study looks at the use of metaphor in English-language university lectures, and at the problems that this presents to international students attending those lectures. As it stands, it is mainly a quantitative study. The second study, which is more qualitative, looks at the use of metonymy by staff working in a university day nursery and outlines the problems identified by a student of English employed there as a part-time staff member. A further aim of this second study was to establish to what extent the metonymies used are genre-specific. The findings from both studies are of relevance to LSP teachers who are preparing their students for entry into a specific discourse community.

## **2. The use of metaphor in university lectures**

In this section, we describe a study that investigates the problems that metaphor presents to non-native students attending lectures in different disciplines at the University of Birmingham in early 2007. This study

builds further on two previous studies. The first one is Littlemore (2001), who investigated the linguistic difficulties experienced by twenty Bangladeshi students studying International Development at postgraduate level in the UK. The study found that the use of metaphor during course lectures presented considerable comprehension difficulties. More particularly, an inability to grasp the meaning of certain metaphors often meant that the foreign students missed the *evaluative* component of the lecture. This is problematic since critical thinking is an important component of academic study in the UK. One of the critical thinking skills is to separate the evaluative components of academic discourse, from the descriptive and explanatory ones; it is vital that also international students are able to do this well (Benesch 2001).

Prior to that, however, the question should be asked if metaphors are actually widely used in university lectures and if they are used to perform important functions. If not, the impact of metaphor miscomprehension, though not in doubt (Littlemore 2001), may perhaps be rather low. Therefore, in order to establish the relative importance of metaphor in university lectures, a second study was conducted (Low et al. 2008). In this study, metaphors used in university lectures were examined with regard to their behaviour and the functions they perform. We used the Praggeljaz metaphor identification technique (Praggeljaz Group 2007; see also Juchem and Krennmayr, this volume)<sup>1</sup> to examine metaphor in three lectures in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. This corpus consists of 160 lectures and 40 seminars recorded in a variety of university departments.

It was found that in these lectures, the metaphoric density ranged from 10 to 13% of all lexical items used, which is a relatively high figure. Even more important than this was the fact that the metaphors identified were often found to serve important evaluative functions. This meant that, as in Littlemore (2001), students who systematically failed to understand the metaphors used, would remain ignorant of what the lecturer actually thought about the subject under discussion. They would not know whether a particular piece of information was being evaluated as good or bad, central or peripheral, and so on. Other metaphors identified in the study were found to serve a discourse-organizing function. Understanding such metaphors is equally critical. After all, academic listening crucially involves an ability to perceive the overall structure of the lecture and to understand how the different parts of the lecture relate to one another. There was also some evidence of coherent metaphor clusters, which often indicated that the lecturer was trying to convey either a particularly difficult point, or one

that he or she felt to be particularly central to the argument. One such cluster is illustrated below:

you know one of the worst examples of competing **on** price was Sainsbury and Tesco's **getting into** a price **war** you know so Sainsbury's **goes down** threepence **on** # baked beans you **bastard** fourpence **on** ravioli you **swine** frozen peas **down** and who the hell **wins** Tesco's actually have got a marginal advantage in that they did actually buy share in the first [0.5] **price war** now you have price **wars** when there is nothing else you can offer [...] then when there is **pressure** when there is limited opportunity then you know it becomes **bare knuckle fighting** it becomes price it becomes very intense competition now you can you can surmise this without [inaudible] there's ways of **combating** that

The study's final finding was that the metaphors in these lectures were never explained to the students.

Taken together, these two earlier studies allow us to conclude the following: metaphors are widely used in academic lectures; they present difficulties to international students; they are important in terms of their communicative functions; and they are never explained to the students. However, the first study was rather narrow in focus in that all the students in the study were Bangladeshi postgraduates studying the same academic discipline (International Development). It is not clear to what extent these findings can be extrapolated to students studying other subjects or to students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The aim of the present study is to address this gap by investigating international students from a wider range of linguistic backgrounds (including Chinese, Russian, Greek, Arabic, and Japanese) and to see how well they handle the metaphors used in lectures across a variety of academic disciplines.

More specifically, our research questions are as follows:

1. What proportion of all lexical items (words and word strings) that the non-native students perceived as problematic were metaphorical?
2. What proportion of lexical items that were perceived as problematic, but which were not completely unknown to the students, were metaphorical?
3. To what extent were students able to explain a selection of salient metaphors?

4. To what extent were students aware of their inability to understand these metaphorical items?
5. What kinds of interpretations did students give for these metaphorical items?

The study is not yet complete and a full account of it is currently in preparation. In this chapter, we will limit ourselves, therefore, to a brief summary of the findings based on a group of mixed nationality students who had signed up for an International Foundation Year programme at the University of Birmingham. As part of this programme, the students attended regular lectures, alongside undergraduates, in order to develop their listening and note-taking skills. In this study, the focus was on four of these lectures, one on business economics, the other three on linguistics, as shown in Table 1:

*Table 1.* Lectures used in the study

No.	Lecture date	Lecturer	Subject area	Lecture title
1	16-01-07	Michael Toolan	Linguistics	Signs and Visual Language
2	01-02-07	James Wilson	Business Economics	Markets, Efficiency, and the Public Interest
3	27-02-07	Geoff Barnbrook	Linguistics	Variations in Language: Accents and Dialect
4	28-02-07	Paul Cobley	Linguistics	Narrative

The aim was to investigate the kinds of problems the metaphors used in these lectures presented to the international students. It involved several testing sessions which took place approximately two weeks after each of the lectures. In each of these testing sessions the students were presented with a transcript of an extract from the lecture. They were asked to listen to a tape recording of the lecture and to follow that recording on the transcript, underlining any words or phrases that they had difficulty understanding. Details of the lecture transcripts are shown in Table 2:



Table 2. Details of the lecture transcripts

Lecture	Lecture length (min)	No. of excerpts	Total transcription length (min)	No. of words
Toolan	45:38	1	13:39	2114
Wilson	46:22	2	8:30	1454
Barnbrook	45:34	2	12:42	1914
Cobley	51:19	2	11:56	1793

Before doing this activity with the students, we ourselves had identified those items in the extracts which we agreed were metaphorical. The metaphoric densities of the lectures are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Metaphoric densities of the four lectures

Lecture	Metaphoric densities
Toolan	3.6%
Wilson	5.2%
Barnbrook	3.8%
Cobley	3.7%
Average	4.1%

The numbers of students attending each session are shown in Table 4. We can see from this table that there was considerable variation among the numbers of students in the testing sessions, which needs to be recognised as a weakness of the study. The reason for this variation is that the students were attending the sessions on a voluntary basis. In fact, the students who participated in Sessions Two and Three had been members of the larger group that participated in Session One.

Table 4. Numbers of students attending each testing session

Student session	Date	No. of students	Lectures covered
1	16-02-07	18	Toolan
2	09-03-07	4	Wilson, Barnbrook
3	23-05-07	12	Cobley

Research Question 1 was *What proportion of all lexical items (words and word strings) that the non-native students perceived as problematic were metaphorical?* In order to answer this question, we collected all the words and phrases that had been underlined in the transcripts and counted the metaphorical ones.

Table 5. Metaphorically used words among those perceived as problematic

Lecture	Total number of problematic items	% of metaphorically used words among those perceived by the students as problematic
Toolan	197	20.2%
Wilson	31	55.2%
Barnbrook	137	59.5%
Cobley	166	43.4%
Weighted average		38.9%

These percentages were sufficient to indicate that we could continue working with the hypothesis that metaphor is indeed a problem for these students. This finding is particularly interesting given that the actual metaphor densities were very low (see Table 3). So, even though the lectures did not contain a high proportion of metaphors, roughly 4 in 10 of them caused comprehension problems for the students. We can tentatively say, therefore, that the conclusions from the Littlemore (2001) study also hold for students with different linguistic backgrounds, studying different academic subjects.

On the other hand, the metaphoricity of a particular difficult item may not have been the main or only source of the problem. It is not unlikely that in some cases students simply did not know the basic sense of the word. For example, if we look at the word *pinnacle* in the phrase “race awareness training really was the pinnacle moment of this whole process,” we would say that it was a metaphor. However, if students found this particular word difficult it may not necessarily have been *because* it was a metaphor. They may simply have not known the word *pinnacle* itself. We therefore felt that it was important to remove items such as this from the analysis. In order to do this, we asked the students to go back over the transcript and to highlight any words whose meaning they did not know at all. We then removed these items from the study and re-calculated the percentages. This approach enabled us to answer Research Question 2 (*What proportion of items that were perceived as problematic, but which were not completely unknown to the students, were metaphorical?*). The answer is shown in Table 6. We can see from this table that when we exclude the totally unfamiliar items, the proportion of problems that are likely to be due to metaphor becomes even higher. The results for the Wilson lecture in this table are particularly striking. His use of metaphor seemed to be disproportionately problematic for the students attending this lecture. The metaphoric density of this lecture was significantly higher than that of the other lectures. This could be an idiosyncrasy of the lecturer concerned or it could be because it was about business economics, rather than the Humanities. Previous research has shown metaphor to be a key vehicle in concept formation in economics (White 2003). On the other hand, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from this part of the analysis as we only examined 8.30 minutes of the lecture.

Table 6. Proportion of (semi-)familiar words perceived as problematic that were metaphorical

Lecture	% of (semi-)familiar items perceived as problematic that were metaphorical
Toolan	37.0%
Wilson	80.4%
Barnbrook	40.0%
Cobley	37.8%
Weighted average	41.8%

Littlemore's (2001) study suggests that students may not always be aware of the problems presented by metaphor. This forms a potential challenge to language teachers: if students are unaware that they have a problem, then how can we expect them to do anything about it? We therefore investigated the extent to which students were aware of the problem posed by metaphor by asking them to explain some of the metaphors in the text.

This led to Research Question 3 (*To what extent were students able to explain a selection of salient metaphors?*) and Research Question 4 (*To what extent were students aware of their inability to understand these metaphorical items?*). In order to answer Research Question 3, we selected from each transcript 30 metaphors that we found to be the most salient, and asked the students to explain them. The students were shown the metaphors in the context of the transcript, and asked to write down, either in English or in their own language, what the metaphors meant. We scored their answers on a scale from nought to two. Completely wrong answers received a score of 0, correct answers received a score of 2, and semi-correct answers received a score of 1. The categories were determined through a process in which four researchers scored fifteen items independently and then met to discuss their scores and the scoring system. Answers were initially scored independently by two researchers who then met to discuss discrepancies in the scores allocated. This occurred for less than 5% of the items, and agreement was reached in all cases. We then calculated the percentage of items that had received a score of 0. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Proportion of metaphors that the students were unable to explain

Lecture	% of metaphorical items that students were unable to explain
Toolan	34.8%
Wilson	30.2%
Barnbrook	51.0%
Cobley	58.5%
Weighted average	44.9%

These findings indicate that the students experienced considerable difficulties explaining the metaphorical items. Note that we agreed that it would be unfair to include, in the above calculation, the items that had received a

score of 1 as some of the errors in this category may have been due to the students' inability to express themselves in English or find an appropriate equivalent expression in their own language.

In order to answer Research Question 4 (*To what extent were students aware of their inability to understand these metaphorical items?*), we compared our findings from this part of the study with those of the first part. For those items that the students had been unable to explain, we looked to see whether or not they had identified them as being problematic in the first part of the testing session. We then worked out what percentage of items that the students were unable to explain had been previously marked as "problematic" by those same students. The results are given in Table 8. As can be seen from this table, the percentages were very low (10% on average), strongly suggesting that students were generally unaware of the problems that metaphor interpretation presented to them. This finding is particularly striking if we look back at the answers to Research Questions 1 and 2. Though the students themselves identified large numbers of metaphors as problematic, even these large numbers of identified problems do not reveal the full extent of the difficulties experienced.

Table 8. Proportion of problematic metaphors that the students themselves had identified as being problematic

Lecture	% of problematic metaphors that the students themselves had identified as being problematic
Toolan	6.2%
Wilson	7.5%
Barnbrook	11.4%
Cobley	15.0%
Weighted average	10.0%

In light of this, we decided that it would be interesting to look in more detail at the types of errors they made when attempting to explain the metaphors. This led us to formulate Research Question 5 (*What kinds of interpretations did students give for these metaphorical items?*). To answer it, we looked at the kinds of student interpretations that had been allocated a score of either 0 or 1. We discussed these errors in depth, and over a series of four meetings, developed a fine-grained taxonomy to deal with the

wide range of errors made by the students. Table 9 on the next page lists the types of error that are most relevant for the present chapter. As we can see, these mistakes can take a variety of forms. It may be rather difficult, therefore, to predict the types of mistakes that the international students will make.

To sum up, this study suggests that the use of metaphor in academic lectures presents a challenge to international students, and that the errors they make fall into a wide variety of categories. Moreover, in the majority of cases, students appear to be unaware of the extent of the problem that metaphor presents. The main implication is that when non-native students are being prepared for academic study at English-speaking universities, metaphor training is no luxury: they should be introduced to the phenomenon of metaphor, and given exercises that help them develop sensitivity to the nuances of metaphorical expressions and the evaluative stance reflected in the utterances in which they occur.

### 3. The use of metonymy in a university nursery

In this section we describe a case study that investigated the use of genre-specific figurative language among members of staff at a university day nursery. The full study is described in Tang and Littlemore (in preparation) and Littlemore (in preparation). The aim of the study was to expand on Partington's (1998: 107) claim that "one of the characterising features of a genre is probably the kind of metaphor generally found therein" and to see whether other types of figurative language, besides metaphor, can be described as "characterising features" of a genre. Our study found a particular prevalence of metonymy in genre-specific figurative language and argued that the use of metonymy is at least as important as the use of metaphor in characterising a genre. Here we cite three examples, each of which illustrates how the community developed its own characteristic metonymic usages. We also briefly discuss the challenges that this presented to a non-native speaker attempting to enter the discourse community. Our main aim is to illustrate the implications that these findings have for LSP teachers.

In the summer of 2007, a member of the research group (Tang) who is of Singaporean nationality, and was studying for a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics at the time of the study, was working part-time at the university nursery. When she began working at the nursery, she was puzzled by the expression "She/he's got a loose nappy," which was used rather

Table 9. Types of errors made by students in the study

TYPE	EXPLANATION AND EXAMPLES
Interpreting the metaphorical part of the item as being about the wrong aspect of the described situation	E.g. <i>the community is kept at a particular <u>uniform level</u> → common way of speaking</i> [The word <i>uniform</i> is misattributed to a way of speaking instead of to the social environment.]
Staying within the source subject matter	The interpretation given attempts to re-express the metaphorical part of the item, but still stays close in subject matter to it. E.g. <i><u>end result</u> → last result</i>
Inappropriate metaphorical interpretation: <i>non-commonplace</i> case	Although it is possible to see a metaphorical motivation for the interpretation offered, this interpretation is not commonplace in English. Moreover, the interpretation is wrong in context. E.g. <i><u>stem from X</u> → seem clearly different from X</i>
Inappropriate metaphorical interpretation: <i>commonplace</i> case	As above, except that the interpretation uses a <i>commonplace</i> metaphorical interpretation of the metaphorical part of the item. This commonplace interpretation is inappropriate in the present context. E.g. <i>[is] <u>held [in place]</u> → happen [in the place]</i>

frequently by the nursery staff to talk about the babies. Whenever she heard it, she duly checked that the baby's nappy was fitted correctly. It was only after a few days working in the nursery that she realised the expression did not mean that the nappy was literally loose, but that the nappy needed changing. What she had not understood was the fact that the expression "loose nappy" was not being used literally, but metonymically to refer not to the nappy itself, but to the state of the bowels of the baby in question. The "loose nappy" expression was frequently used and readily understood by the nursery staff, and in a questionnaire administered to staff at a later stage, all respondents agreed that it was in common usage. However, it posed problems to the newcomer. No examples of this expression can be found in the 450-million-word Bank of English corpus, which

suggests that it is not in common usage outside this particular discourse community.

The use of metonymy by discourse communities has been reported elsewhere and is even present at primary school level. Nerlich et al. (1999) report on a child's use of the expression "I love being a sandwich" to mean that he liked being one of the children who are allowed to bring in a lunchbox, rather than eating a school dinner. They argue that child's use of the expression is likely to have come from the institutional discourse of the school where defining characteristics are often used by a teacher to refer to groups of children as a kind of convenient shorthand.

Inspired by the "nappy" example mentioned above, we thought it would be worthwhile to assess the nature of the genre-specific figurative language found in this discourse community. Would it be mainly metaphorical (as Partington suggests) or would there be other types of figurative language, such as metonymy? The study involved collecting spoken language data from the nursery. Having obtained the requisite permission, we purchased two recording microphones and Tang wore one of them every day for work, over a two-week period. The other microphone was worn by various different members of staff working in the nursery. We were able to collect approximately twenty hours of language spoken by staff in the nursery, which was then transcribed to compile a small corpus. The corpus contains a mixture of language used between staff, and by staff when talking to the children. The language used by the children themselves was not transcribed for data protection reasons. The corpus thus contains a selection of the spoken language used by a particular workplace discourse community: the university nursery. We then searched the corpus independently for potentially genre-specific uses of figurative language. A questionnaire was also administered to staff working in the nursery. In this questionnaire, members of staff were asked to specify the meaning of the expressions discussed in this article, to say why they are used and to say whether or not they are common in the nursery setting. There were five respondents to the questionnaire. As part of the study, Tang observed the extent to which the nursery staff adapted their language when speaking to her, as a non-native speaker. Although this last approach is not a very systematic way of studying the issue, and more follow-up research would be required to verify the findings, it is interesting to see the problem from the language learner's perspective.

In the larger study, it was found that the majority of the genre-specific uses of figurative language involved metonymy, not metaphor. We would like to illustrate this by presenting three extracts from our data, each of



which contains a metonymy that was found to be peculiar to the discourse community. Each extract contains a usage that occurred more than once in the corpus and which was identified through the questionnaire as being in common usage in the nursery discourse. All three extracts are taken from interactions between members of staff working in the nursery. The language that staff use to communicate with one another can be said to constitute a single genre with a clear set of communicative purposes (see Swales 1990), which are, in this case, to convey information about the children and to carry out the day-to-day tasks involved in the running of the nursery.

In order to assess whether these examples were characteristic of the particular discourse community or whether they are more typical of general English, they were compared to Bank of English data. The Bank of English was chosen as a reference corpus because it was the largest regularly-updated monitor corpus available at the time of the study. The full unanalyzed data set can be found in Tang (2007) and fuller descriptions of the study can be found in Littlemore (in preparation) and Tang and Littlemore (in preparation).

### Extract 1

- [Member of staff A] Ldon't forget you need to put in your numbers, [NAME] for that week.  
She's gonna do Tuesdays and Fridays at 8am okay, and also=*Oh no*, what you have to do=do your numbers
- [Member of staff B] Right
- [Member of staff A] and then if you got like a gap, she'll have to put Thursday so there you've got thirty-four for Tuesday pm, just put
- [Member of staff B] Lso if I just put, just do my numbers and then each /day/, I'll just  
Write down, with [NAME], without [NAME], would that do with [NAME], [NAME]and [NAME]?

In this extract, “my/your numbers” refers metonymically to the number of children of that age group who would be attending that particular day and according to the staff questionnaire “do your numbers” means “take the register.” This usage appears to be highly specific to the discourse community. In order to verify this, Bank of English searches were conducted for

“my+numbers” and “your+numbers.” These searches produced 46 and 100 citations respectively. The most frequent topic for this metonymy in both searches was the national lottery, which was indicated by phrases such as “check my numbers” and “my numbers came up.” Other frequent topics included numbers of voters and sales figures. In other words, a relatively conventional metonymy is given its own particular “twist” by the staff working in the nursery. It is also accompanied by a distinctive collocation with the word *do*.

In the second example, we have the metonymic use of the word *agencies* to refer to “members of staff from an agency,” as we can see in Extract 2 below:

*Extract 2*

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Member of staff A | ... shift on Tuesday, would that be alright? Yeah? Which shift are you able to be in? The eight forty five?   |
| Member of staff B | Can't tell you what I've got on there   |
| Member of staff A | Okay, you've got eight fifteen to two thirty. Would it be just the afternoon of the morning one and then move the other <u>agencies</u> around? Cos if I move [NAME] with [NAME], do you...<br>what have you got there? |
| Member of staff B |   |
| Member of staff A | So if you lose some of the eight, if you lose the eight fifteen to two thirty, then moving [NAME] and [NAME] a bit earlier.   |

Four of the five questionnaire respondents said that this usage is common in the nursery and two tokens were found in the corpus. A Bank of English search for the word *agencies* revealed 16,825 citations. A manual search of the first 500 of these randomly ordered citations showed that none of them were used in the metonymic way that they are used here. In the citations studied, the word *agencies* was always used to refer to an organisation or government body. This therefore suggests that this particular meaning extension and usage is characteristic of the nursery community.

Staying with the theme of depersonification, the children themselves were often depersonified by the staff in the nursery, when they were being talked about, as we can see in the third extract:

## Extract 3

[Member of staff] [NAME], one veg bowl and who else has [NAME] got, she's got [NAME] and she's got urm ... [NAME] and one meat bowl

Here, the children are classified according to whether they are vegetarians or meat eaters. Instead of being a “meat eater”, or “a child who eats meat,” the child in question becomes a “meat bowl.” Again, the primary function seems to be the facilitation of speedy communication; staff members are so familiar with the nursery’s daily routines that it allows them to use these kinds of shortcuts. The Bank of English contained no examples of this exact metonymy, which is perhaps to be expected as the metonymy is very specific. On the other hand, in the literature on metonymy “the ham sandwich on table eight” (used by a waitress to refer to the customer who happens to be eating the sandwich) is a widely-cited and easily-understood example. This suggests that the conceptual metonymy POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR and its variations are readily available to speakers of English. Some other uses of words in the data also seemed to be highly specific to the discourse community such as “on a visit” to refer to a child who is spending time with the next group up in order to prepare for an imminent change in group.

The case study also looked briefly at metonymy from the language learner’s perspective. Tang observed that the nursery staff appeared, at least superficially, to adjust their language in order to make it easier for her to understand as a newcomer and non-native speaker. They sometimes did this by using the same sort of language that they used with the children. In other words, they employed exaggerated intonation, spoke very slowly, and made use of frequent repetition, which she found somewhat patronizing. However, one of the things that they did *not* do was to explain or paraphrase the types of metonymy mentioned above. Even though she had a high level of proficiency in English, it took her several days to work out exactly what was meant by “loose nappies,” “numbers,” and “agencies.” It may well be that the native speakers (and at the same time, established members of the nursery discourse community) did not think to adjust their metonymic language because of the deeply embedded nature of these metonymies, the fact that they are used so frequently, and the fact that, on the surface of it, the language used appears to be very simple.. More research is needed, however, to find out whether in fact these are the reasons why metonymy is rarely explained.

To sum up, the main finding from this study is that metonymy is used by members of the discourse community in ways that are sometimes unique to that discourse community, although there are some links with metonymic usages in the wider English-speaking community. Metonymy presented difficulties to a non-native speaker attempting to enter the discourse community, at least in the short term, and members of the community were, to a large extent, unaware of these difficulties, as evidenced by the fact that they never attempted to paraphrase their metonymies.

#### 4. Conclusions

The main conclusions that we would like to draw in this chapter are as follows:

1. Genre-specific metaphor and metonymy are used in spoken discourse to extend the meanings of conventional lexis in discourse communities.
2. The use of metaphor and metonymy in spoken discourse presents problems to language learners who often have to contend with genre-specific meanings and usages.
3. More research is needed into the different ways in which different discourse communities use metaphor and metonymy.
4. More research is needed looking at ways in which language learners can be helped to identify, and make use of, the functions of metaphor and metonymy.

The problems that genre-specific metaphor and metonymy present for non-native speakers are likely to be twofold. Not only do they have to learn a new language but they also have to learn the variety of language that is used by the particular discourse community that they wish to enter, and in order to learn this variety, they need to get to grips with metaphor and metonymy. From a language teaching perspective, it may be useful for language teachers, particularly those teaching speaking skills in an LSP context, to highlight the use of metaphor and metonymy by particular discourse communities, and to help their students to prepare for it. Not only do LSP students need to know that their target discourse community will make use of its own specific lexis, they also need to know that it will extend the meaning of mainstream lexis via metaphor and metonymy. Such extensions may be signaled by the presence of unusual collocations.

There are two possible roles for LSP teachers here. One is to teach their students those metaphorically and metonymically extended meanings that are prevalent in the target discourse community. A second role is to help their students to develop the kinds of strategies that they need to work out the meanings of such usages when they encounter them. These might include: teaching them how to make use of all contextual and co-textual cues (including body language and unusual collocations), looking for extended meanings in cases where the utterance does not appear to make sense to them; asking for clarification in cases where they think they may have misunderstood.

Finally, it remains to be said that, although the focus of this paper has been on metaphor and metonymy, in authentic discourse these are likely to interact with other figures of speech, such as hyperbole and irony, in order to create and convey meaning. It would therefore be useful to take a more discourse-analytic approach to the study of the ways in which different types of figurative language interact in different discourse communities to shape meaning and identity, and to look at how second language learners deal with this phenomenon. Findings from such research would be likely to have useful pedagogical applications, as well as having implications for more formal theories of metaphor and metonymy.

## Note

1. The Pragglejazz method is currently the most influential and robust method for identifying metaphor in discourse. For an exemplification of the procedure, see the chapter by Juchem and Krennmayr (this volume).

## References

- Benesch, Sarah  
2001 *Critical English for Academic Purposes: Theory, Politics and Practice*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Caballero, Rosario  
2006 *Reviewing space: Figurative Language in Architects' Assessment of Built Space*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

- Cameron, Lynne  
1999 Operationalising 'metaphor' for applied linguistic research. In Lynne Cameron and Graham Low (eds.) *Researching and Applying Metaphor*, 3–28. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, Lynne  
2003 *Metaphor in Educational Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Charteris-Black, Jonathan  
2004 *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Charteris-Black, Jonathan  
2005 *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dudley-Evans, Tony, and Maggie Jo St John  
1998 *Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferreira, Luciane  
2008 A cognitive approach to metaphor comprehension in a foreign language. In *Cognitive Approaches to Second/Foreign Language Processing: Theory and Pedagogy*. Paper presented at the 33rd International LAUD Symposium, Landau, Germany, 123–141.
- Gibbs, Raymond  
1994 *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goossens, Louis  
1990 Metaphonymy: The Interaction of Metaphor and Metonymy in Expressions of Linguistic Action. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1: 323–340.
- Jakobson, Raymond  
1971 The metaphoric and metonymic poles. In *Fundamentals of Language 2*, Raymond Jakobson and Morris Halle (eds.), 90–96. The Hague/Paris: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Koller, Veronika  
2004 *Metaphor and Gender in Business Media Discourse: A Critical Cognitive Study*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark  
1980 *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Littlemore, Jeannette  
2001 The use of metaphor by university lecturers and the problems that it causes for overseas students. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(3): 335–351.

- Littlemore, Jeannette  
 in prep. The role of figurative language in creating and maintaining a discourse community's identity: The university nursery. In *Figurative Language in Discourse Communities*, Alice Deignan, Jeannette Littlemore, and Elena Semino (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Littlemore, Jeannette, and Graham Low  
 2006a *Figurative Thinking and Foreign Language Learning*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.  
 2006b Metaphoric competence and communicative language ability. *Applied Linguistics* 27(2): 268–294.
- Low, Graham, Jeannette Littlemore, and Almut Koester  
 2008 The Use of Metaphor in Three University Academic Lectures. *Applied Linguistics* 29(3): 428–455.
- Nerlich, Brigitte, Zazie Todd, and David Clarke  
 1999 'Mummy I like being a sandwich'. Metonymy in language acquisition. In *Metonymy in Cognition and Language*, Günter Radden and Klaus-Uwe Panther (eds.), 361–384. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Partington, Alan  
 1998 *Patterns and Meanings. Using Corpora for English Language Research and Teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Pragglejaz Group  
 2007 A practical and flexible method for identifying metaphorically-used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol* 22(1): 1–40.
- Swales, John  
 1990 *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tang, Polly  
 2007 Figurative language in a nursery setting and a non-native speaker's perspective on this discourse community. *Unpublished MA dissertation*, University of Birmingham.
- Tang, Polly, and Littlemore, Jeannette  
 in prep. The roles of figurative language in child-directed speech. *Child Development*.
- White, Michael  
 2003 Metaphor and economics: The case of growth. *English for Specific Purposes Journal* 22(2): 131–148.

