THE USE OF METAPHORS IN BUSINESS PRESS ARTICLES

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Abstract

Metaphors represent an important and notable characteristic of current business and financial journalism. Used in this context, they are no longer perceived as pertaining exclusively to literature but rather as vehicles providing new insights into specialist business related terms. The present paper aims to highlight some of the most relevant aspects related to the use of metaphors in business press articles, since these represent specialist and authentic business texts which provide learners with highly specialized business lexis. It is worth mentioning that the examples provided in this paper have been taken from *The Economist*.

I. Introduction

English has rapidly become the *lingua franca* of the business environment. In consequence, all those performing in this environment: employers, employees, business partners worldwide, etc are fully aware of the need for learning English. Nevertheless this phenomenon has turned into an issue of great importance to language teachers as well.

Learners' needs vary but one of the common needs they all share is that of acquiring vocabulary that is common core in specialist business texts. In order to enable them to acquire this specialist lexis teachers need to expose students to all kind of specialist business texts or to a specialist business context.

A considerable part of the research carried out in the field of Business English has focused mainly on the practical aspects of teaching Business English, and there are quite many studies on this subject since teachers of Business English actually teach business professionals (experienced learners) or individuals preparing for a career in the business environment (pre-experienced learners). It is worth mentioning that both categories are interested in the functionality of the language (Business English) rather than in its linguistic characteristics. This is one of the major reasons that explain the relatively limited research into the linguistic characteristics of the business lexis and Business English respectively.

One of the most important names of the ones that have carried out research on this topic is that of Douglas Pickett. Pickett himself agrees that Business English is a part of ESP but he also defines some specific characteristics stating that:

> "...as business and commerce are by definition an interface between the general public and the specialist producer... it must be a lot nearer the

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everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP." (Pickett 1986a:1)

Although Business English is a part of ESP, Pickett believed that it is much more complex than other areas. In other areas of ESP, specialist language is only for intra-group communication and in consequence, there is no need for a link to the general public. Pickett made a comparison between Business English and the doctor-patient relationship in that doctors, as well as discussing with each other, also need to be able to relate to their patients in understandable language.

Therefore, broadly speaking there are two main communication areas: an internal communication – among businesses and an external communication – with the general public.

When considering business English texts, various specific lexical features have to be taken into account. First of all, it has been agreed on the fact that the business lexis is layered – technical vocabulary and the sub-technical one. Secondly, business texts abound in abbreviations and acronyms. Thirdly, there is a certain sociolinguistic orientation – people choose how to speak business language depending on the subject, situation and a whole range of sociolinguistic factors. As Pickett puts it, the language used by business people display *"sensitivity to subject matter, the occasion, shared knowledge and social relations holding between companies and communicators"* (Pickett 1986b: 2). Another characteristic refers to a certain degree of formality and courtesy – this is usually found in the forms and frameworks of conventionalised transactions (business letters; faxes; memos etc). The next characteristic is the one that we are going to focus on in this article, the use of metaphors, especially in business press articles. We shall refer here to *The Economist* magazine. Last but not least, closely connected with the characteristic mentioned above, we could also note the one referring to the use of idioms.

II. General considerations of metaphor – the traditional perspective vs. the contemporary approach to metaphor

Metaphors are part of our every day's language. Some of these metaphors are so often used that one is unaware of their metaphoric meanings and they stop being perceived as metaphors.

Concerning the definition of metaphor, much of the difficulty in defining it originates in the problem of whether it is best considered as a cognitive phenomenon related to how we understand things or as a linguistic phenomenon related to how we express them (Cameron & Low, 1999). Therefore, the problems of defining metaphor arise from the complexity of the relationship between thought and language.

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The metaphor has drawn scholars' attention for more than 2000 years. Traditionally, scholars regarded it as a matter of language, a linguistic phenomenon and defined it as a figure of speech in which an implicit comparison is made between two unlike entities. From this traditional perspective, the metaphor expresses the unknown/unfamiliar (the *tenor*) through the known/familiar (the *vehicle*).

It was considered that it was used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose. Therefore its study was confined mostly to literature and rhetoric, its role being primarily decorative and ornamental.

However, in 1980 Lakoff and Johnson approached the idea of metaphors differently. They developed a new theory that has become known as the *cognitive view of metaphor.* According to this new perspective, the metaphor is defined as a cognitive mechanism whereby one conceptual domain is partially mapped onto a different conceptual domain, the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one: "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (1980: 5). The domain that is mapped is called the *source* and the domain onto which it is mapped is called the *target.*

Within this new approach of cognitive semantics, the metaphor is assigned more than a purely aesthetic function, as proposed by comparison and substitution theories; rather, it is seen as basic to human cognition and thus salient in the way we speak and talk about the world. Several aspects related to the new approach on metaphor are worth being mentioned, i.e. the claims that metaphor:

- structures human thought, and is thus more than just an element of linguistic surface structure,
- is pervasive and systematic, and
- allows us to understand the abstract through the concrete.

III. Metaphors used in business press articles – *The Economist*

Next, we shall try to spread some light on the issue of metaphors used in business press articles. As it has been mentioned above, the concept of audience seems to be of paramount importance in the choice of language used in a business context. This focus on the importance of audience was also found in work carried out by Posteguillo & Palmer (1997), who discussed the use of language in business articles found in newspapers. They distinguished between two types of articles:

1. *Business Press Articles (BPA)* – these are aimed at the actual business community to both give information and perhaps influence the economic development of the country.

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2. *Business News in the Press (BNP)* – this refers to articles aimed at the general public, their main purpose being simply to give information on important business events.

The aim of their research was to find significant distinguishing features between these two types of articles. Their results showed that whilst there were some similarities, owing to the fact that both can be seen to belong to the same genre of journalese, there were in fact significant differences. These differences were attributed to the different intended audiences of the articles. There is a summary of those factors shared by the two types of articles and the distinguishing features found between them in the table below.

***Similarities*:**
1. Both had similar average sentence length.
2. Both had a similar number of finite verb forms per sentence.
3. Both used similar amounts of the passive and active voice in sentences – the active voice being used more than the passive.
***Differences*:**
1. BPAs had double the references to specific figures.
2. BPAs had an average of 35 business terms per article whereas BNPs had only 25.63.
3. BPAs used more technical acronyms than BNPs.
4. Differences in syntax: the BPAs had much more complicated sentences than the BNPs.
5. Differences in the use of visual aids: BNPs often used a cartoon or clarifying map whilst BPAs used tables and graphs.

Similarities and differences in BPAs and BNPs

In their conclusion Posteguillo & Palmer state that:

> "All these distinctions can be related to the existence of two different types of audiences: a specific readership of business people in the case of BPAs, and a wider less business aware audience in the case of BNPs." (Posteguillo & Palmer 1997: 114)

It can be clearly observed from this that there is a gradation of difficulty in the articles according to their audience, i.e. simpler language for the general public and a more complex one for the business people themselves.

Obviously, business press articles have different audiences from textbooks. Therefore, besides being informative, the journalist needs to be entertaining as well, in an attempt to make the articles more lively and interesting. One way of achieving this is by making use of metaphors.

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Charteris-Black thinks that metaphor is in fact an essential characteristic of technical discourse and plays a key role in making it easier to understand:

"Meanings may be realized by word choice that differs what is in some sense typical or unmarked, and anything approaching technical language for example, tends to become noticeably more complex if one simplifies it by removing the metaphor." (Charteris-Black 2000: 159)

In 2000 he carried out a comparative language analysis of *The Economist* magazine and the economist section of the Bank of English corpus. The results suggested that the metaphoric lexis in *The Economist* was higher in frequency than in the general magazines. In this case, business English learners are dealing with more specific types of metaphors as part of their 'technical' register.

However, some of us wouldn't expect an article on an economic issue to be subjective and to abound in figures of speech, that is why, as we mentioned above, we also have to take into account the journalistic style.

We have stated in the introduction of this paper that the examples provided to support our arguments and ideas are going to be examples taken from *The Economist* magazine. Why *The Economist*? The answer is very simple. First of all, the articles from *The Economist* offer a register of economic discourse that is rather specialised but at the same time fairly popular and often argumentative: "*The Economist* believes in plain language. Walter Bagehot, our most famous 19th-century editor, tried 'to be conversational, to put things in the most direct and picturesque manner, as people would talk to each other in common speech, to remember and use expressive colloquialisms'. That remains the style of the paper today." (http://www.economist.com/help/DisplayHelp.cfm?folder=663377#About_The_Economist). Secondly, the use of metaphors in this type of journalistic discourse serves many different purposes and it may sometimes offer a greater linguistic variety than would be expected from the use of metaphors in more technical economic registers.

According to Boers (2000) typical metaphorical themes in economics are: MECHANISMS and MACHINES, ANIMALS, PLANTS and GARDENING, HEALTH and FITNESS, FIGHTING and WARFARE, SHIPS and SAILING, and SPORTS. Some of the themes mentioned by Boers have been found in the business press articles of *The Economist* magazine. Next, we are going to provide some examples that illustrate these themes, but these are just some of the many examples of metaphors we came across when reading *The Economist*.

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First of all, many of the metaphors are related to the ideas of health and fitness or the lack of them:

- "He says *the recent decline in energy prices is a 'symptom of* demand destruction' that has dire implications for overall profitability."
- "... the list of troubled firms has now extended far beyond the house builders and building-suppliers firms that *were the first* ***casualties*** of the subprime-mortgage crisis..."
- "This *relative* ***health*** *of the economy* was largely due to high energy prices..."
- "The banking sector, too, now *looks much* ***healthier***."
- "*Merrill Lynch is still struggling* ***to cauterise its wounds***, even after taking $46 billion of write-downs and parachuting in John Thain, the former head of NYSE Euronext."
- "Chinese banks have also largely escaped *the problems which have* ***paralysed*** *credit markets* elsewhere."
- "*What was once seen as evidence of corporate* ***fitness*** *for the moment looks like* ***anorexia***."
- "*Defending the rouble from further depreciation will* ***bleed its reserves***."
- "Apart from carmakers and other manufacturers, the list of those laying people off now includes Pepsi bottlers, law firms, retailers, media companies, chemicals producers and even technology firms. *All are desperately* ***seeking a cure***. *And* ***the most attractive medicine on offer looks like cash***."

In the last example mentioned it is clear that companies are desperately trying to find a solution to their problems. Instead, the author, by using the metaphors in bold, induces the idea that companies have "**health**" – **financial** problems and the only "**cure**" – **solution** to their problem would be the "**most attractive medicine**" – in this case, **cash**.

Other metaphors are related to the idea that economy is a machine or mechanism:

- "China still has one advantage over other countries. If necessary, the state-controlled banking system can be directed to increase lending to firms. That would raise long-term concerns about the future quality of bank's assets, but in the short term it would help *to keep the economy* ***ticking***. The importance of this, says Mr. Wang, is that fiscal stimulus can jump-start the economy, ***bank lending is the fuel*** *needed to keep it going*."

In this case, in order to keep the economy "**ticking**" – **functioning**, it is necessary to come up with the right solution – "**fuel**", which here refers to **bank lending**.

Other common metaphors that can be found in business press articles make reference to the idea of water or liquidity, as well as ships and sailing:

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- "*Banks have spent the past year **shoring up** their balance sheets* but, after some big losses, investors have lost their appetite for more share issues".
- "*Profits have also been **buoyed up** by strong demand* from overseas, especially emerging markets".
- "... he expects *America's GDP **to shrink*** over the coming year..."
- "*Lehman's shares **have sunk** so low* that its market value of $5 billion now languishes some way below what it hopes to get from Neuberger Berman."
- "With almost *every investment to date **under water***, *contributions **have been drying up***."
- "The Fed's new swap lines with other *central banks are an important reassurance for countries that face **a liquidity squeeze***; those swap lines deserve to be systematised and broadened."
- "In 1998 – 1999 Dragonomics reckons that the real growth rate fell below 5% while *reported growth **dipped** only slightly below 8%.*"
- "Hence Wolseley has seen *demand for its products **dry up*** as the number of new homes being built has plummeted."
- "However, some analysts argue that ***tapping** relatively cheap bank credit is not wise* unless firms really need the money."
- "In a developing economy infrastructure spending is also less likely to be wasteful than in a rich country like Japan, which built bridges to nowhere during the 1990s *in an effort **to keep the economy afloat***."

IV. Conclusions

As proven by the examples provided above, business press articles offer a rich metaphorical material for study. Furthermore, they facilitate and enhance understanding by simplifying what would otherwise be sometimes too complex for learners to understand. Metaphors also have a useful function in teaching by helping to raise learners' awareness of specialist business vocabulary and to improve learners' specialized reading.

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