More with Less: Using Metonymy in Teaching Romanian Culture. A Brief Analysis of a Project

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Abstract: *The article analyzes how language learners acquire cultural concepts in the process of developing verbal fluency. Relying on the definitions on metonymy and metaphor, respectively, as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in* Metaphors We Live By *(1980) and in* Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought *(1999), and George Lakoff in* Women, Fire and Dangerous Things *(1987) it examines how conceptual fluency develops with the help of a scaffolded syllabus based on collaborative activities. The demonstration is based on a collaborative writing project by Beginner level (I and II) students of the Romanian Language and Culture Program at Columbia University, completed during the Fall and Spring semesters of 2015-2016.*

Keywords: *Romanian language teaching, collaborative, verbal fluency, conceptual fluency, metonymy, metaphor, prototype*

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Teaching a less commonly taught language within an academic milieu where it is either seen as an *instrument* for enhancing one's professional career, or a mere academic pursuit, lacking in immediate practicality, makes the task of the instructor even more difficult. On the one hand, the highly-qualified language instructor brings to the party his/her own expectations and unspoken desire and pride to teach everything that he/she knows, thus proving his/her professional value, while on the other hand he/she feels pressured by the constraints of OPIs, CEFRL and ACTFL[1] assessment criteria, and by the students' background and type of interest in the language. In my concrete case, the Romanian program is taught to all interested learners at Columbia University,

[1] OPI – Oral Proficiency Interview; CEFRL – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; ACTFL – American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

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irrespective of their program of study (BA, MA, PhD, post-doc), in an administrative formula that involves categories such as "Eastern Europe", "the Language Resource Center", and "the Slavic Department". Lots of identities, lots of hats to be worn by the instructor, students and administrators alike, and many questions to be answered. Perhaps, the most important question is the following: how does one teach "cultural concepts" that are valid in a language class that exists outside a structured degree program? Obviously, this question triggers another: in the age of communicative teaching of a language, how do we transmit "concepts" across a curriculum that seems devoid of any interest for the good, old, grounded teleology? And, does it make any sense to conceive our curriculum in such a manner, or shall we simply succumb, with a helpless sigh, to the leveling assessment criteria, as there is no way back, and we cannot teach "content" in a purely communicative language class? If we do decide not to abandon the idea, then we find ourselves in a whirl of teaching materials, most of them respectful to the trend *du jour*, that is to the communicative teaching of languages, as it has proven efficient, fast and well-loved by the learners, as opposed to the tediousness of the old grammar/ translation/ literature approach. On top of everything, here comes the rapidly changing technology in language learning, efficient mostly in the case of LCTLs, where raising enrollments "makes it or breaks it".

In short, teaching Romanian at Columbia University made me deal, as it happened to all of my colleagues who teach LCTLs, with all of the aforementioned situations; at the same time, per my own background and need to teach not only the language as a mere instrument for communication, but cultural notions, I had to design syllabi that were recognizable and in compliance with the norms of the Romanian Language Institute and of the host university, inasmuch as they had to develop at least some cultural competence in learners. Mention should be made of the fact that the students can take any language in semestrial modules, which means that they are allowed to complete their 6-semester program with gaps, or at a different institution, should they so decide. In terms of syllabus and curriculum design, it means that the instructor must focus on coherence and autonomy for each level of study, being aware of the fact that some students may not continue with the language/culture study.

All this appears as pertaining to internal logistics. Nevertheless, when we take into account all the factors that regulate the teaching and learning of Romanian language and culture within this particular program, one can see that the solving of difficulties that arise resides in reflecting, as a language/culture instructor and syllabus designer, on:

1. what the commonalities of heterogeneous contents, methods and tools involved in the process are;

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2. how these commonalities should be transferred to the teaching philosophy of the instructor, which is mandatory at this particular university;
3. how one creates, applies and assesses a syllabus that makes all ends meet and that is able to incorporate a newly re-adopted tendency in language teaching, that is CLAC (content learning across curriculum);
4. how the above will transfer in a technology-enhanced classroom, especially in a distance synchronous classroom, and how we use the activities that make sense in a distance classroom in the regular classroom, if at all.

In order to reflect upon all these issues, I ventured to evaluate my syllabus for the beginning class against the basic concepts developed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and Lakoff in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (1987), as they have made their way in language teaching for more than two decades now. The multitude of methodological and linguistic applications of the authors' revolutionary theory on metaphor and metonymy makes it almost impossible to adopt one solution for each particular case, as most of the post-Lakoffian articles generalize individual cases. Therefore, based on the data that I have collected, I will try to advance a number of possible applications of Lakoff's theory on metaphor and metonymy in language teaching. My analysis will not comprise statistical data, as I worked with a small group and I have no native speaker comparative group for the analyzed level of language learning (Beginner I and Beginner II). The conclusions may be useful, though, to all those trying to create syllabi and to come up with teaching strategies for LCTLs, especially in cases when one deals with a small, yet heterogeneous group of learners. I will support my demonstration using an older but illustrative wiki project created and presented by Beginner I students during the 2015-2016 academic year. Reference will be made, when appropriate, to earlier class projects with the participation of distance students. Some hypotheses will also rely on the project presented by the same group of learners at the end of their Beginner II class.

Theoretical Aspects

In the preface to *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, George Lakoff lists a series of characteristics of his "different view" on conceptual categories and "on human reason, in general", out of which I mention: thought is embodied, meaning that "the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of a physical and social character" (xiv); "thought is imaginative, in that those concepts which are not directly grounded in experience employ metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery – all of which go beyond the literal mirroring, or *representation*, of external reality; (…) thought has an *ecological structure*. The efficiency of cognitive processing, as in learning and memory, depends on the overall structure of the conceptual system and on what the concepts mean. Thought is thus more than

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just the mechanical manipulation of abstract symbols (...)" (xv). In reply to objectivism, he refers to "the new view" as "*experiential realism*, or alternatively as *experientialism*" (xv). It is in this very articulation of the Lakoffian cognitive models and conceptual system that we can find useful information for language and culture teaching, and from where the reflections on language teaching, based on cognitive linguistics, have started. A later reflection of Lakoff's in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, coauthored with Mark Johnson, takes the demonstration even further, but this does not make the object of my current analysis.

Another point that has drawn the attention of linguists and language educators, alike, is the notion of *prototype*. Different from the classical theory of categories (which was not even articulated as a theory, Lakoff argues), the prototype theory may explain how certain natural languages (i.e. conceptual systems) may group notions that are apparently conflicting, under the same category. For a language and culture instructor, this offers a lot to reflect upon, corroborated with the affirmation that "thought is imaginative" (Danesi 4). Language learners can thus be encouraged to become creative in the L2, based on their own conceptual system and through activities that do not rely on "textbook literalness" (Danesi 4).

Based on these very few and schematic theoretical notions that appear in Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, I will now argue why my analysis will focus on metonymy, and not on metaphor. For Lakoff, metonymy is "one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is extremely common for people *to take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of part of it"* (Lakoff 77, italics mine).

Apparently commonsensical, this definition of metonymy offers more ideas for a language/culture class than it seems. Metonymy is a source of prototype effects, Lakoff argues further: "a situation in which some sub-category or member or submodel is used (often for some limited and immediate purpose) to comprehend the category as a whole" (Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* 79). In my opinion, this appears extremely important in the analysis of teaching language through culture, especially in a course such the one that I teach. Understood as such, metonymy is more than the Lakoffian model, or the image schemata, found in the natural language, that it activates. It may even encompass the understanding and production of metaphors at the lexical level, as we will see below.

Metonymy, will therefore be used in my analysis to detect some of the mechanisms that inform the vocabulary/syntactic choices of beginner students in a creative project in Romanian. Before that, I will briefly present the applications of Lakoffian theories in language and culture teaching, as

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theorized by Marcel Danesi and analyzed statistically by Ebru Türker. We should keep in mind that both authors formulate conclusions with application to level 3 (L3-L5, ACTFL), that is advanced students. Both of them worked with contrast groups of native speakers, and with large groups of participants in the Italian, and Korean language classes, respectively. My conclusions, as I mentioned before, are formulated using a much smaller group, and for a much lower level of linguistic acquisition.

In his seminal study "Learning and Teaching Languages: The Role of *Conceptual Fluency*", Marcel Danesi noticed that, despite the progress made in language teaching, occasioned by the shift from the old formalism to functionalism, language teachers continued to decry the fact that "autonomous student discourse lacks the conceptual richness that characterizes native speaker discourse" (Danesi 3), in other words it lacked 'conceptual fluency'. Using a statistical study that showed that the average native speaker of English produces about 3,000 metaphors per year, he compared this to the "unnatural degree of textbook literalness" of the language learners; the cause of this, he thought, may be "the fact that students have never had the opportunity to access the metaphorical structures inherent in the target language and culture directly" (Danesi 5).

What is the difference, the author wonders, between the "verbal fluency" (VF), that is grammatical and communicative knowledge, and the desired "conceptual fluency" (CF) that is a benchmark in assessment within most of the assessment systems (CEFR, ACTFL, the Canadian Bar, etc.) for the independent user level and, obviously, for the advanced level. Unfortunately, Danesi writes, "students speak with the formal structures of the target language, but they *think* in linguistic structures as *carriers* of their own native language concepts." He continues: "To be conceptually fluent in a language is to know, in large part, how that language *reflects* or encodes concepts on the basis of metaphorical reasoning"; this appears as the simplest definition of CF in language learning. What I find very relevant in Danesi is that he draws attention to the fact that the Lakoffian generalization which states that all concepts are structured metaphorically is arguable, as many of the LL aspects pertain to different orders, such as perceptual, iconic, indexical, etc. If we go through the enormous quantity of literature in the field, especially through books and seminal articles that speak about the scarcity of cultural competence in the language class or offer solutions for intercultural communication and, consequently, for reaching the desired level of cultural competence, we realize that conceptual fluency overlaps, by and large, with aspects of intercultural communication or what we are used to calling, in planning, teaching and assessment, cultural competence. I would dare to say that intercultural communication (so exquisitely theorized by Claire Kramsch, among others, and by the Australian school, recently) is one of the *means* to

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the end, which is CF. My idea is supported by Danesi's presentation of ways of incorporating culture in the language class:

1. the interaction with the L2 native culture through activities (mini-dramas, field trips in areas where native speakers/manifestations of native culture may be encountered);

2. the anthropology process (creation and teaching of units where the SL learner is encouraged to make hypotheses about the culture of the SL);

3. the activation of *ego-dinamicity*, which involves the creative participation of learners to the production of messages within that can be assessed within the norms of conceptual fluency.

In the case of first level students, it is considered that a certain unconscious transfer of native language patterns and intentional utilization of resources happen, mostly in the case of psychomotor habits (pronunciation), or other cognitive schemata that are not ready for conscious attention. In other words, the depth of CF cannot be acquired at this level, as there is always an unconscious projection against the background of one's native CF.

Given all this, how can we put together the concepts presented before and how, above all, do we integrate the concept of metonymy in the acquisition of CF, when the quoted studies speak mainly of the metaphor?

What We Did, How We Did It with "Less"

A good deal of the activities and classroom practice, even some of the syllabus revision, originate in the almost ten years of practice in distance learning, in synchronous mode. Not only does the instructor have to rethink the syllabus, in order to include activities that "make sense" in a doubly-mediated environment, he/she has to rewrite the course materials so that they make sense to the "community" with which he/she works, while keeping in mind the assessment criteria for the envisaged exit level. On top of everything else, especially in a LCTL classroom where the interest of students for culture can be rather heterogeneous, and sometimes, outright hard to quantify, the instructor has to keep the learners "in line", and to create a coherent cultural syllabus. After many attempts, whose results were presented at different conferences, either individually, or in collaboration (Momescu, Koulopoulos, 2012; Momescu, Koulopoulos, 2014; Momescu, 2015, unpublished), and after the increasing pressure of a "mapping languages, mapping minds in distance teaching", an ongoing project at Columbia University, I reached the conclusion that a "metonymic" approach in teaching the language through culture would satisfy the needs of students and of the instructor, alike. As the number of registered distance students varied drastically during the last two academic years, sometimes way into the middle of the semester, I had to continue, in a regular classroom, with a syllabus and materials initially designed for a distance class, adapted for the new milieu.

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At the beginner level, where my syllabus starts from the center, the desired VF is acquired via activities that activate what Danesi coins as "anthropology process" – i.e. the gradual discovery of the L2 culture. This takes about two-three weeks, until the students develop some confidence in their skills. During this period, they are presented with "representations" of the culture in language that avoid even the slightest allusion to concepts structured metaphorically. The activation of ego-dinamicity is very basic, if at all present, detectable only in the unconscious transfer of the tendency to use the first person of the verb, an aspect which has been discussed extensively in SL acquisition studies.

The "theme" of the first semester is Bucharest, more precisely, an imaginary trip to contemporary Bucharest. The part stands for the whole, that is for (a) Romania and (b) the concepts that are activated first in a VF mode. Examples:

1. objects stand for concepts (basic anthropological concepts, such as movement, feeding, etc.). The learner does not seem to find this as different from the "ritual" of any SL class, as during the first weeks there is a lot of culturally indexical practice, and very much of the denotative one;

2. part stands for the whole, as mentioned above;

3. center and periphery – the shift from a coherent "tourist" approach towards one in which the center *will* stand for the periphery occurs in parallel with the shift from an anthropological process towards the activation of ego-dinamicity, where the CF begins.

How do these translate, if at all, in Lakoffian terms, as they seem, at best, efficient teaching strategies in a LCTL class, where the instructor has to be "all things to all people"? How do we verify that "Metonymy is a source of prototype effects", "a situation in which some sub-category or member or submodel is used (often for some limited and immediate purpose) to comprehend the category as a whole" (Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* 79)?

At the same time, we should not forget that, using a syllabus that is compliant with the Romanian Language Institute assessment criteria and recommendations and with the assessment criteria against which students will be tested by their home university, or country, there is an inherent level of "textbook literalness" that is evident in the first semester project, although the degree of VF is rather high, and the ego-dinamicity perfectly activated.

Starting from the place of origin stands for identity, the students imagined a crime story placed in Bucharest. In a Leerssen-type activation of imagemes (Leerssen, "The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey"), they explored national stereotypes and possible intercultural encounters as understood from a visible, that is metonymic, perspective.

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The two stories converge, and much of the editing, including the transfer of cognitive schemata, was done in collaboration, as we preserved the collaboration model from the distance course. The negotiation at the metonymic level will be visibly clear from the following examples:

a. VF stands for CF in a sociolect (children and parents in the modern world):

> Alo? Mama? Am aterizat la București. Da, sunt obosită, dar este în regulă. Da, știu unde este hotelul. Cu taxiul. Da, mama, știu, este mai scump. Știu, este posibil să merg cu autobuzul. Sunt obosită, am spus! Am un bagaj. Mama! Mama, trebuie să merg. Mi-am găsit bagajul. *Hai mă, mama, pa!*

We can see that the learner still uses cognitive schemata from her own language, such as the repetition of *știu*.

Textbook (or instructor-induced textbook-type) literalness, which is assimilated by the learners with CF, is still present, and, at this level, it satisfies both the need for safety, which is acquired by activating the conceptual schemata in one's native language, and the desire for acting within "prototypes":

> — *Vă rog să porniți aparatul de taxat*. (TL)
> — *De unde veniți?* (TL+IL)
> — Sunt din S.U.A.
> — O americană? *Vorbești* română destul de bine. (CS from one's native language)
> — Ah...*mersi*. Parinții mei sunt români.
> — Aveți treburi în București? În vizită la rude?
> — *Păi…ca să spunem așa…* (IL)
> — Ce?
> — *Deci*...nu o să vă vină să credeți. (instructor's rules and interdictions, counterexamples perceived as CF)

b. CF is gradually acquired; the learners produce sentences in which they "imagine" the reaction of a Romanian towards an American, and they move, with confidence to negotiations in which they act, simultaneously, as insiders/outsiders of the two cultures:

> Pe când am închis ușa, am auzit:
> — *Americani nebuni*... (imageme/function of prototype/towards CF)
>
> -- Cunoașteți un restaurant, care se numește Pescarul?

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-- Da, știu de el. Dar bucătăria sa este foarte...*tradițională***.**
-- Și?
-- *Și americanii preferă, de obicei, ceva mult mai familiar. Cel puțin la început.*

-- Da, păi, nu merg acolo să iau masa, *deci*...
-- Ce?
-- Eu numai vreau să știu cum să ajung acolo. Vă rog.
-- Bine... Puteți să faceți stînga pe Căderea Bastiliei și mergeți până la Piața Romană de unde luați metroul o stație până la universitate. Ieșiți de la metrou pe bd. Bălcescu și vedeți restaurantul la numărul 9. Ajungeți cam în 20 de minute. (space markers, metonymic function, subfield)

Emanuel Marcovici, 67 de ani, a fost găsit ucis la 8 dimineața de un colector de gunoi pe aleea din spate a Restaurantului Pescarul, Blvd. Nicolae Balcescu Nr. 9
București, România.
Cauza morții: o lovitură de cuțit în piept. Medicul legist a decis că a fost o crimă.
Momentul morții: între ora 20 și miezul nopții.
Martorii au raportat că au văzut victima în restaurant cu o noapte înainte, când el a luat cina cu doi oameni. Victima și ceilalți doi sunt fideli ai locului.

— Ah, *nene Morcov*, ce ai pățit?— a întrebat *eroina intrepidă dumneavoastră.* (CF, learner's choice, assimilation of phonological patterns Marcovici/Morcov, ego-dinamicity activated; it coexists with cognitive schemata from learner's own language)

Era profesor la universitate. A venit aici de multe ori; *părul său era roșu* ...

— *Așteaptă, vă referiți* la tipul mort? Sunteți de la poliție? (cross-contamination)
— Asta nu vă privește. Îl cunoașteți pe decedat?

The story of the other participant to the project appears even more interesting, for two reasons:
a. he produces his discourse from an "anthropology process" perspective;

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b. the mechanisms of CF are activated, simultaneously, at a metaphorical level. However, as we can see below, he still prefers to be on safe ground and selects metaphors and "cultural inside jokes" that appear in the learner's culture:

> Matematicienii m-au așteptat, m-am gândit. Am mers de-a lungul Bulevardului Regina Elisabeta până la Universitatea din București. Am intrat în clădirea universității, l-am întrebat pe portar unde se află Facultatea de Matematică și Informatică. Am urmat instrucțiunile portarului; am ajuns la intrarea facultății. După ce am deschis ușa, am văzut *un spectacol înfricoșător*. Sala era întunecată, și niște indivizi făceau niște *lucruri indescriptibile*. Un om, a cărui față nu am putut să o văd, m-a tras de braț spre biroul său. Ai grijă, deși ei nu sunt așa de periculoși; *ei sunt doar topologiștii, mi-a spus. "Celebrează grupul fundamental al cifrei opt.*"
> *Cuvintele profesorului dându-mi curaj*, (CF) am părăsit biroul său și am revenit în sala în care celebrează topologiștii. Unul din topologiști mi-a părut cel mai puțin periculos. L-am abordat. Acest topologist mi-a spus: Bine ați venit. Vă rog să îi iertați pe colegii mei. Înțeleg dacă ei vă par un pic … nebuni."
> – Bineînțeles că ei mi par nebuni! Nebuni este un adjectiv prea blând pentru acești … oameni. La universitatea mea, profesorii muncesc și ei în birourile lor, dar nu țin niciodată ritualuri. Sunt relativ plictisitori, dar nu sunt demenți! *Din când în când ei merg la conferințe, și ocazional ei chiar își dau seama de existența studenților lor! Sunt … profesori."*
> Topologistul normal a răspuns: *Sunt normali majoritatea timpului. Dar, când ei celebrează exemplele canonice ale topologiei, deci, puteți să vedeți ritualurile lor răscolitoare! Sunteți norocos că ziua de azi nu e ziua pentru sticla lui Klein!* Aproape m-am înecat într-o suprafață neorientabilă! Sticla lui Klein nu poate chiar să se încorporeze în spațiul euclidian tridimensional! Este de necrezut ce se întâmplă la aceste ritualuri! Este aproape înfricoșător ca atunci când am fost aproape strangulat de o banda a lui Möbius! Cel puțin o banda a lui Möbius poate să se încorporeze în spațiul euclidian tridimensional".

The collaborative "policier" produced by the learners begins with cultural stereotypes practiced as VF exercises, moves towards the integration of cultural stereotypes of the L2 culture (mystery, remoteness, danger) and develops into a story that integrates the professional background of the learners in it. One of the participant was, at the time, a student in mathematics at Columbia University, while another one studied journalism and Eastern European history. In the story, a long paragraph on mathematical notions,

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treated with humor, seems to play the decisive role in the "murder" of an old and weird professor of mathematics. The mystery is finally solved with the help of a journalist, who happens to be quite knowledgeable in the history and customs of Romania and of Bucharest. As the story gets more narrative "traction", and the authors' confidence increases, the "inside" jokes, as mentioned above, produce metaphors that are perfectly intelligible in Romanian. The text does not appear as a writing exercise of an L2 learner but as the result of a creative exercise by a native speaker who chooses to experiment with foreign characters and who treats them, and the story, with humor.

How We Continued

The second semester project continued the expansion of the model *part stands for/origin stands for*, combined with a shift from center to margins/periphery. In terms of metonymic mechanisms, I would venture to say that the correlation of a syllabus based on a spatial distribution of the "cultural notions" with exercises that went "in-depth", helped us shift from the "by the way" and/or "tourist approach" towards the "cultural monuments" approach without the perils of the objectivist approach. Functionalism devoid of "cultural content was avoided, too, as we tried to scaffold our learning towards a deeper CF. While references to external, visual metonymies are not that frequent than in the first semester project, where the learners needed more deictic and indexical "certainty", the CF is rendered here by going one level down, that is down into the deep structures of the language, as follows:

Example 1. While the work was still in progress, one of the participants asked me what the best way to render "the cultural meaning/implications of *cardinal rides* in English" would be, as he wanted to use an equivalent as relevant as the original one. So, we began to identify the semes and sememes: "superficiality", "fake amusement", "ride". Thus, we came up with *Până și o călătorie într-o mașinuță bușitoare* [bumper car] *la bâlci*[cultural equivalent of *amusement park*] *ar fi fost mai captivantă decât aceea cu prietenul meu, șoferul*. How did we come up with this? With visual aids and explanations, with *translations* of concepts that were anchored in space (marked culturally) and time.

Example 2. The same learner illustrated ego-dinamicity by playing with the metonymies *margin-center* (and what they stand for) in a manner that activated the cultural stereotypes that constitute *imageme* clusters, such as the difference between the urban people and the village people, the academic milieu and the rest, the *normal* and the *not normal*. One can easily see that the desire to go

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beyond the deictic, indexical, denotative markers of culture learning in the language class make this particular learner act on the right way towards CF.

Example 3. The other participant to the project illustrated, for the second semester, CF at a different level: the distribution of tenses in narration, the natural use of Perfect Simplu show an internalization of prototypes that were transferred from textbook literalness to a metonymic understanding of the mechanisms of the language; *it stands for a certain regional identity, and for a certain structure of the narration*.

Conclusions

After a brief examination of our practical results, we may conclude that:
1. scaffolded VF activities produce a natural development of the CF;
2. the conscientious development of prototypes comes from the basic, evident, non-metaphorical but metonymic models.

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