

# The Development of Figurative Competence of Students of English

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2023**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:875532>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-01-15**



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Dvopredmetni preddiplomski studij Njemački jezik i književnost i Engleski jezik i  
književnost

Matej Adlešić

**Razvoj figurativne kompetencije studenata engleskog jezika**

Završni rad

Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Mario Brdar

Osijek, 2023.

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Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

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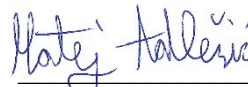
Osijek, 2023

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U Osijeku, 31. kolovoza 2023.

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## Sažetak

Figurativna kompetencija odnosi se na sposobnost razumijevanja i tumačenja figurativnog govora – drugim riječima, izraza poput metafora i metonimije, pri čemu se radi o upotrebi određenih riječi kako bismo izrazili nešto drugačije od onoga što smo doslovno rekli. Takvo izražavanje pruža način izgovaranja običnih stvari na izvanredne načine, koje govornici (ili pisci) moraju pravilno koristiti, a slušatelji (ili čitatelji) pravilno dekodirati kako bi se postigao željeni učinak. Kako učenici postaju bolji u engleskom jeziku, prirodno je da bi željeli dublje savladati jezik. Figurativni govor se ponekad otpisuje kao više povezan s umjetnošću nego "normalnim" govorom, ali kognitivni lingvisti koji su o njemu pisali smatraju ga bitnim dijelom ovladavanja jezikom. Osim toga, postoji mnogo načina na koje figurativni jezik oblikuje naše misli i postupke, što je još jedan razlog više da se učenici stranog jezika upoznaju s načinom na koji funkcionira njegov figurativni govor. Brojna istraživanja su otkrila da učenicima L2 nešto nedostaje figurativnih vještina razumijevanja, navodeći razloge poput nepoznatosti, ali neka su istraživanja pokazala da studenti ne vide vrijednost u figurativnom govoru. Pod pretpostavkom da će većina studenata koji studiraju engleski jezik na Sveučilištu u Osijeku najvjerojatnije preuzeti uloge nastavnika (koji bi trebali služiti kao jezični modeli za svoje studente) i prevoditelja (koji trebaju znati prevesti figurativni jezik) u budućnosti, za očekivati je da će u budućnosti željeti što više razvijati svoje jezične vještine, što zahtijeva uključivanje figurativnog razumijevanja u njihov repertoar. Istraživanje predstavljeno u ovom radu poslužilo je za usporedbu figurativnih razina razumijevanja studenata 1. i 3. godine engleskog jezika na Filozofskom fakultetu, zaključujući da ne postoji ekstremna razlika u sposobnosti, iako su studenti treće godine u prosjeku imali nešto bolje rezultate. Razlozi za takve rezultate navedeni su u odjeljku za raspravu. Istraživanje je otkrilo da studenti cijene figurativnu kompetenciju kao vještinu i za učitelje i za prevoditelje, kao i za svakodnevne govornike, ali imaju tendenciju precijeniti vlastitu razinu poznavanja takvih izraza.

**Ključne riječi:** Figurativna kompetencija, Metonimija, Metafora, Kognitivna lingvistika, Razumijevanje jezika, L2 učenici

## Summary

Figurative competence refers to the ability to understand and interpret figurative speech – in other words, utterances such as metaphors and metonymy, which are cases in which we use certain words to express something different from what we literally said. These expressions serve as ways to say ordinary things in extraordinary ways, which have to be properly used by speakers (or writers) and properly decoded by listeners (or readers) in order to have the desired effect. As students get better at English, it is natural that they would desire to master the language in-depth. Figurative speech has sometimes been disregarded as more related to art than “normal” speech, but cognitive linguists who have written about it refer to it as an essential part of language mastery. Additionally, there are many ways in which figurative language shapes our thoughts and actions, which is all the more reason for learners of a foreign language to get acquainted with the way its figurative speech works. There have been numerous studies that have found that L2 learners somewhat lack in figurative comprehension skills, citing reasons such as unfamiliarity, but some research has indicated that students do not see the value in figurative speech. Assuming that most students majoring in English at the University of Osijek will most likely take up the roles of teachers (who should serve as language models for their students) and translators (who need to know how to translate figurative language) in the future, it is to be expected that they will wish to develop their language skills as much as possible, which requires incorporating figurative comprehension into their repertoire. The study presented in this paper has served to compare the figurative comprehension levels of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, concluding that there isn't an extreme difference in ability, although 3<sup>rd</sup> year students did perform slightly better on average. The reasons for such results are given in the Discussion section. The study has found that the students value figurative competence as a skill for both teachers and translators, as well as everyday speakers, but tend to overestimate their own level of familiarity with such expressions.

**Keywords:** Figurative competence, Metonymy, Metaphor, Cognitive linguistics, language comprehension, L2 learners



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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to determine students' attitudes towards figurative competence in general, as well as their attitudes towards metaphor and metonymy specifically. Additionally, I compare the level of figurative competence of 1st and 3rd year students of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek in order to establish whether there is a significant difference in their ability after 3 years of studying English. For the sake of this comparison, I will be focusing on metonymy and metaphor specifically. I will first give an overview of how figurative competence has been understood by various researchers, what it entails, as well as what the difference between metaphor and metonymy is. Afterwards, I will explain the methods used in this study, as well as show the results. The results will be discussed in detail in the Discussion part of the paper. Afterwards, I will provide a conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the study, while discussing the significance of the findings for students of English.

## 2. Literature review

For the purposes of this research paper, it is important to establish what figurative competence constitutes and what its characteristics are. Levorato (1993) defines figurative competence as “the ability to deal with figurative language” (as cited in Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert, 2010, p. 318). There has been some research focused on the level of figurative competence in L2 learners. In a study on figurative competence among English students in Vietnam, Tran (2013) has found that “the students’ figurative idiomatic competence is extremely low from different perspectives” (p. 31). Tran cited three reasons for why the performance was so low, “the underestimation of the importance of idioms in language teaching [in Vietnam by both students and teachers],” “[unfamiliarity with chunks of words due to] learning individual words and associating each with a [Vietnamese] equivalent” and “[a lack of] adequate repetition and practice over a period of time to step further toward automaticity” (Knowles, 2004, as cited in Tran, 2013, p.31). In a study on Japanese students’ comprehension of metonyms, Littlemore et al. (2016) found that the errors students made in interpreting metonyms “included ‘under-specification’ (providing too little information), focusing on the wrong part of the ICM (...), misinterpreting contextual cues, and misinterpreting the syntax” (p. 57). “Most notably, a number of students interpreted the metonymic expressions as if they were metaphors” (Littlemore et al. 2016, p. 57), which means that they interpreted the expressions more figuratively than they were supposed to.

It is sensible to examine the features of figurative language to shed further light on the reason why L2 learners of English have trouble with it. “Levorato (1993) distinguishes three features of figurative language: the discrepancy between speaker’s meaning and utterance meaning, conventionality and contextual dependence” (Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert, 2010, p. 318). Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert (2010) say that the discrepancy criterion is a matter of degree because, while irony is used to imply the opposite of what is said, metaphor and metonymy tend to substitute the meaning of an utterance. Conventionality refers to how frequent an utterance is and dependence on context refers to the need of a background through which someone would interpret a figurative utterance (pp. 318-319). Furthermore, to be able to understand figurative utterances, one must first be able to recognise them as such. Cohen (1978) likens metaphors to jokes, in the sense that one must first recognise that they are faced with a metaphor/joke, before being able to understand it. Even then, one might not be able to understand the joke (in this case, metaphor), if they don’t have the relevant subtext to unpack the meaning behind it (p. 10-11).

It is important to establish what metaphors and metonyms are and what their value is. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) refer to metaphor as “a device of the poetic imagination and the

rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language.” (1980, p. 3) They suggest that many people think they can get by in life without metaphor, as they see it as “characteristic of language alone,” (1980, p. 3) while not being applicable to concrete things, such as “thought or action” (1980, p. 3). While some may argue that metaphorical expressions are not much more than poetic fluff, Cohen (1978) suggests that there is a sort of intimacy to be gained through the use of metaphors – the message’s sender is inviting the recipient to decipher it, through which both sides of the conversation engage in “coping with a piece of language” (p. 9). Lakoff and Johnson (1981) consider language to be an important source of insight into the way we think and act, because these processes are tied to the same conceptual system as language (p. 3). For example, the use of the metonym “brass,” which is an expression used to refer to people in a position of leadership due to the type of metal used to produce medals of officers, has implications about how we view the military. Metaphors are based on how humans experience something and the way they associate that experience to another. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) refer to this phenomenon as “experiential bases” and consider the comprehension and adequate representation of metaphors to be entirely dependent on understanding these bases (p. 19). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide insight into how metaphors influence our thought by analysing the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. They claim that arguments are not only talked about as if they were wars, but that concepts applying to war also apply to arguments, such as winning or losing, facing an opponent, or attacking and defending arguments, which implies that the metaphor influences how we act while arguing (p. 4). As Warren (2002) puts it:

In metaphor, the source expression is a holder of properties, some of which represent economically and efficiently attributes of the target. In some cases the properties that we wish to express are so elusive that they cannot be expressed in any other way than by metaphors, which probably accounts for the strong tendency of concrete to abstract directionality in metaphor. The reverse direction (abstract to concrete) is rare. There is, not surprisingly, no such directionality in metonymy. (p. 122)

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metonymy is the act of “using one entity to refer to another that is related to it” (p. 35). Metonymy is fundamentally different from metaphor in the sense that it is more literal than metaphor. “While metaphor involves mapping (of meanings) between (semantic) domains, metonymy is an intradomain phenomenon. For instance, the metonym university, which has a “literal” meaning of “institution for higher education,” is from

the same domain as the entity “people who work at the university”” (Deignan, 2005, p. 73). Warren (2002) explains the difference between metaphor and metonymy as such:

The most common description of the fundamental difference between metaphor and metonymy is that the association which takes us from source to target is analogy and similarity between otherwise dissimilar phenomena in the case of metaphor and concomitance in the case of metonymy. (p. 114)

According to Dirven (2002), metonymy and metaphor are different processes in that metonymy brings two concepts together by mapping their meanings onto each other, but they both keep existing in the form of a system, which is different from what metaphor does – while it also brings together two domains, one of them (the source domain) stops existing, while its properties are mapped onto the one that persists (p. 100).

### **3. Research questions**

The questions this study seeks to answer are:

1. How important is figurative competence to students of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek and how confident are they in their ability to comprehend figurative speech?
2. How figuratively competent are 1<sup>st</sup> year students compared to 3<sup>rd</sup> year students?
3. Is there a disparity between how competent students consider themselves to be and how competent they truly are?

### **4. Methods**

The purpose of the study presented in this paper is to examine how important figurative competence is to 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, while comparing the figurative competence levels of the respective groups and explaining what types of metaphors and metonyms they had trouble with, to determine whether students’ figurative competence is improving through their studies. The study was conducted among students of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. There were

two participating groups. The first group consisted of 33 1<sup>st</sup> year students and the second group consisted of 29 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. All participating students were enrolled in a Double Major BA.

Both groups were presented with the same questionnaire (see Appendix), which consisted of 6 questions designed to gather data on attitudes towards figurative competence and 20 questions designed to test students' knowledge of metonyms and metaphors (10 of each) and their ability to interpret them. In the first set of questions, students were asked simple "yes" and "no" questions to determine their subjective attitudes towards figurative competence, while the second set of questions required them to provide suitable paraphrases or explanations of the provided figurative utterances as free-form answers. The selection of metonyms and metaphors was based on the ones encountered by students throughout the undergraduate curriculum.

## 5. Results

Students were asked 6 questions to determine their attitude toward figurative competence. The results can be seen in Table 1. The table is split into two parts, one that displays the results of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students and one that displays those of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. The purpose of the first part of the questionnaire was to determine the participants' level of confidence in regard to metaphor and metonymy, as these aspects of figurative speech would be used to compare and contrast how well 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students interpreted figurative utterances. Additionally, students were asked whether they considered figurative competence important for people such as everyday speakers, translators, and teachers, which should indicate whether most students found figurative competence important for themselves, as these are the roles they will be occupying in the future.

Table 1. – Results of the questions on students' attitudes towards figurative competence with percentages

Year	1		3	
Participants	33		29	
Think they are familiar enough with metaphors	32	<b>97%</b>	28	<b>97%</b>
Think they are familiar enough with metonymy	22	<b>67%</b>	23	<b>79%</b>
Think they were taught figurative competence well at the faculty	24	<b>73%</b>	20	<b>69%</b>

Consider figurative competence important for everyday speakers	25	<b>76%</b>	20	<b>69%</b>
Consider figurative competence important for translators	33	<b>100%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
Consider figurative competence important for teachers	31	<b>94%</b>	28	<b>97%</b>

Both groups of students answered similarly to the question “Would you say you’re familiar enough with metaphors?” with 97% of both groups answering “yes.” 67% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students answered “yes” to the question “Would you say you’re familiar enough with metonymy?”, while 79% of third year students did the same. 73% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students answered positively when asked whether they had been taught figurative competence well at the faculty, while slightly fewer 3<sup>rd</sup> year students did the same at 69%. 76% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students considered figurative competence important for everyday speakers, while 69% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students thought the same. 100% of both groups of students answered that they consider figurative competence important for translators, whereas 94% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 97% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students agreed that it was important for teachers. Overall, students were more likely to consider themselves familiar enough with metaphors, rather than metonyms. Most students agreed that they were taught about figurative competence well at the faculty. The results of the final 3 questions of the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the questionnaire indicate that, while students found figurative competence to be relatively important for all presented roles, the value of figurative competence for everyday speakers was (in the eyes of the students) lower than the value for teachers and in turn, lower than the value for translators.

Table 2. – Results of the metonym recognition test

Year	1		3	
"a Picasso"	29	<b>88%</b>	27	<b>93%</b>
"the Crown"	31	<b>94%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"gun"	25	<b>76%</b>	24	<b>83%</b>
"a pack"	32	<b>97%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"Wall Street"	19	<b>58%</b>	22	<b>76%</b>

"the pen"	28	<b>85%</b>	25	<b>86%</b>
"hands"	32	<b>97%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"Shakespeare"	31	<b>94%</b>	28	<b>97%</b>
"The White House"	29	<b>88%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"the brass"	17	<b>52%</b>	14	<b>48%</b>

Table 2 shows the results of the second set of questions, which served as a metonym recognition test. Students were presented with example sentences, such as “They were auctioning a Picasso.” They were asked to provide suitable paraphrases or explanations for the underlined terms, presented in the table above. The students were required to provide free-form answers, which would later be graded as true or false. On average, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students performed slightly better than 1<sup>st</sup> year students, which will be discussed in the Discussion section of the paper. The numbers in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> row after the terms themselves represent how many 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students respectively were able to provide a suitable explanation or paraphrase for the underlined metonyms, while the bolded numbers next to them show the percentage of students (per year) that these numbers represent, which were later used for comparison purposes.

Table 3. – Results of the metaphor recognition test

Year	1		3	
"an early bird"	33	<b>100%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"a chicken"	31	<b>94%</b>	28	<b>97%</b>
"hit the books"	31	<b>94%</b>	29	<b>100%</b>
"on the ball"	11	<b>33%</b>	7	<b>24%</b>
"bite the bullet"	14	<b>42%</b>	14	<b>48%</b>
"cutting corners"	17	<b>52%</b>	18	<b>62%</b>
"get bent out of shape"	16	<b>48%</b>	11	<b>38%</b>
"parade-makers"	9	<b>27%</b>	10	<b>34%</b>
"to go back to the drawing board"	21	<b>64%</b>	24	<b>83%</b>



"to cover your bases"	17	52%	16	55%
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Table 3 shows the results of the third set of questions, which served as a metaphor recognition test. The process for comparing the two groups was identical to the process used to compare metonym comprehension. Students were once again presented with example sentences such as “Your sister is an early bird.” They were then asked to provide suitable explanations or paraphrases, after which the data was analysed and formed into the table above. The first two columns show the number and percentage of 1<sup>st</sup> year students who were able to provide an acceptable paraphrase or explanation for the provided metaphors, while the second two show the results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. On average, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students performed better than 1<sup>st</sup> year students again, but both groups performed significantly worse at deciphering metaphors than metonyms, which is a result that doesn’t align with the results of the first part of the questionnaire, where students, on average, claimed to be more familiar with metaphors, rather than metonyms. This disparity will be further discussed at the end of the Discussion section of the paper.

**6. Discussion**

The results of the study will be elaborated on in the order that they were presented to the students. The results of the two groups of participants will be compared using the percentages rather than raw numbers, in order for the discussion to remain comprehensible.

Intriguingly, the results of the first two questions indicate that 97% of both groups considered themselves to be familiar enough with metaphors, while only 67% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 79% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students considered themselves to be familiar enough with metonymy. Although students were, on average, more confident about their ability to interpret metaphor than metonymy, the study has found that, on average, students performed much better at interpreting the meaning behind metonyms than metaphors. A reason for this could be that the different nature of metonyms and metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that metaphor and metonymy are different because metaphors are used to understand one thing as another, while metonymy is used to reference one thing while saying another, while also enabling understanding of the subject (p. 36). Students may have had difficulties with interpreting metaphors they didn’t outright remember due to the more abstract nature of metaphors (in

comparison to metonyms). Similarly, in a study conducted among 410 monolingual German participants, Michl (2019) found that metonymic and metaphoric idioms had about the same average ratings for familiarity, whereas comprehension ratings were somewhat higher for metonymic idioms, which participants also rated as much less non-literal than metaphoric idioms (pp. 108-110).

The third question's result indicates that 73% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 69% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students find that they have been taught figurative competence well at the faculty, meaning that 1<sup>st</sup> year students are slightly more satisfied. This is a generally positive result, while still leaving room for improvement.

The results of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> question were meant to be analysed side-by-side. The results show that a significant number of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students (76% and 69% respectively) consider figurative competence important for everyday speakers. In contrast, 100% of both groups found figurative competence important for translators. Finally, 94% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 97% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students said that figurative competence is important for teachers, which is a result that is very relevant to the faculty's students, because these are the occupations most of the students intend to pursue.

In the second part of the questionnaire, students were asked to provide a suitable interpretation of the underlined metonymic expressions in the given sentences. Both groups performed quite well, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students performing slightly better on average.

88% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 93% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly interpreted "a Picasso" as "a painting created by Picasso" in the sentence "They were auctioning a Picasso." The reason for such a high success rate is presumably due to how well-known Picasso was as a painter, which evokes a strong association. Lakoff and Johnson (1981) say that "When we think of a Picasso, we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, in and of itself. We think of it in terms of its relation to the artist, that is, his conception of art, his technique, his role in art history, etc." (p. 39). Similarly, 94% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 97% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly identified "Shakespeare" as meaning "his works" in "I love reading Shakespeare." Evidently, neither group had issues with PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT metonyms.

94% and 100% of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students respectively were able to recognise the meaning of "the Crown" in the sentence "The Crown is well respected in England." This is a standard example of a metonym, where a part of the royal attire (the crown) stands for the monarchy itself. Dirven (2002) explains the significance of this metonym:

A second motivation for the Crown type of metonymy is its figurative potential: given the conceptual distance between this element in the regalia system and the institution 'monarch' (see Fig. 3), the image of the crown becomes an almost predestined candidate for figurativisation as a symbol of this institution. Of course, the sceptre is also a symbol of the monarch, and even the robe may be used as a symbol as in a nineteenth century request to Queen Victoria: "May Lesotho be a flea in your majesty's robe?" But only the Crown becomes a conventional metonymic symbol: what it has in addition to the two other regalia is that it does not just symbolise one aspect of the institution, e.g. the power or the dignity, but that it symbolises both the timelessness and its hierarchic structure as head and personification of the nation. (pp. 102-103)

76% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 83% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly identified the metonym "gun" as referring to a marksman, sharpshooter, gunman etc. in the sentence "He was the best gun in the West." In this case, a few students provided the answer "cowboy," which would have been a wrong answer, as cowboys aren't necessarily gunmen. The association may have its roots in the Croatian term for "Western" – kaubojac (cowboy movie).

97% and 100% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students respectively correctly identified the meaning behind the metonym "a pack" for "a pack of cigarettes" in the sentence "My father used to smoke a pack a day."

Many students struggled with interpreting "Wall Street" as the "stock market, finance, business etc." in the sentence "It's a rough day on Wall Street." Only 58% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students gave a correct interpretation, while 3<sup>rd</sup> year students did a bit better with 76% providing an acceptable answer. Similarly, only 52% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 48% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly interpreted the metonym "the brass" as "leadership" in the sentence "We don't give out the orders, that's up to the brass." The reason students struggled with these expressions may be that they have very specific cultural origins – "Wall Street" is a term specific for the American stock market, whereas students who don't consume media with a military theme might not be familiar with an expression such as "the brass." Similarly, Littlemore et al. (2016) found that the sentence "Why am I such an anorak?" was understood by only 37.5% of the Japanese students who participated in their study, citing the absence of trainspotters (the stereotypical "nerdy" wearers of the anorak in Britain) as the reason for this (p. 62).

85% of 1<sup>st</sup> and 86% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were able to interpret “the pen” in the sentence “The pen is mightier than the sword.” as “the (written) word,” which is an expected outcome, seeing as the saying is quite commonplace, almost cliché. This example is used by Warren (2002) to show the rhetorical power of metonymy. She says that “*the pen is mightier than the sword* is doubtless much more expressive than *persuasive words are superior to violence*.” (p. 125)

97% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 100% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were able to interpret “hands” as “more workers” in the sentence “We’ll need more hands at the farm.” This is a standard example of synecdoche, which is a special part of metonymy, “where the part stands for the whole” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 36).

88% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 100% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly interpreted “The White House” in the sentence “The White House has declared chocolate chip ice-cream a national treasure.” According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the metonymy of “The Times” in the sentence “The Times hasn’t arrived at the press conference yet,” is used to refer to “the importance of the institution the reporter represents,” rather than just some reporter working for the institution (p. 36). Similarly, in this case “The White House” signifies “the government” or “the president (of the USA).”

In the third part of the questionnaire, students were asked to interpret the underlined metaphoric expressions in the given sentences. Both groups performed significantly worse than in the second part of the questionnaire, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students performing slightly better on average.

None of the students from either group struggled with the meaning of “an early bird” in the sentence “Your sister is an early bird.” This is a typical example of a metaphor, where the characteristics of an animal (songbirds wake up early) are applied to a human. 100% of both groups were able to interpret this expression correctly, presumably because of how common this expression is.

Most students (94% of the 1<sup>st</sup> years and 97% of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students) were able to interpret the meaning of “chicken” as “coward” in the sentence “He’s always been a chicken.”, which is an example of a structural metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) say that structural metaphors are, much like orientational and ontological metaphors, based on correlations we recognise based on our experiences. (p. 61). In this case, the chicken's timid nature is applied to a human to point out cowardice.

Slightly fewer 1<sup>st</sup> year students (94%) were able to interpret “hit the books” in the sentence “It’s time you hit the books.” as “start studying.” The results are favourable for both groups, while implying a slight improvement in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students’ competence.

Many students struggled with the expression “to be on the ball,” which they were presented with in the sentence “You are on the ball.” The expression means as much as “to be alert” or “to be sharp”. In some contexts, even “you are correct” would be a suitable interpretation, where one would have to be “sharp” to come to a conclusion (e.g. “Am I tasting notes of walnut in this dish?” “You’re on the ball.”). In this case, 33% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students gave a correct interpretation, while even fewer 3<sup>rd</sup> year students (24%) were able to do the same. The reason for the 1<sup>st</sup> year students performing the way they did is most likely the unfamiliarity with the expression, seeing as most students answered with “I don’t know.”, while many 3<sup>rd</sup> year students gave an interpretation suitable for the utterance “The ball is in your court now.”, which is “It’s your turn (to do something) now.”, which they encountered in a vocabulary quiz during the third year of their studies.

42% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 48% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were able to interpret “bite the bullet” in the sentence “Just bite the bullet and get it over with.” as “Do something unpleasant because it’s necessary.” Many students from both groups wrote that it means “do it”, which is an answer that is on the right track but lacks the specificity to be correct.

52% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students successfully interpreted “cutting corners” in the sentence “No cutting corners this time.” as meaning “skipping important steps while doing something” or taking “shortcuts.” In contrast 62% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were able to do the same, meaning that, on average, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were 10% more likely to accurately interpret this metaphor.

Both groups struggled with the utterance “to get bent out of shape” in the sentence “No reason for you to get bent out of shape.” Interestingly, 1<sup>st</sup> year students performed 10% better than 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, seeing as they had a 48% success rate, compared to a 38% success rate among 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. The most common wrong interpretation was “to go out of your way”, which implies that many students may have focused on the aspect of “changing shape” by associating it with “changing the way one is going”. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the systematicity of metaphors enables the comprehension of one aspect of a concept in the terms of another, but also hides other aspects of the concept, preventing us from focusing on other aspects of the concept, which are deemed inconsistent with a metaphor, such as the aspect of “giving you

[...] time, [...] in an effort at mutual understanding” (1980, p. 10) being sidelined in a passionate argument, due to the way we compare arguments to battles (1980, p. 10).

In the next sentence, both groups were presented with a neologism from another 3<sup>rd</sup> year vocabulary quiz, which was the expression “parade-maker” in the sentence “New drivers tend to be parade-makers.” The expression implies that inexperienced drivers tend to drive very slowly, leading to a row of cars building up behind them (a “literal” parade). As expected, not many 1<sup>st</sup> year students were able to interpret the utterance (27%), however, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students didn’t fare much better, coming in at a 34% success rate. Many students interpreted “being a parade-maker” as being a show-off, presumably because they interpreted the “parade” as being metonymically related to showing off, instead of imagining a literal parade of cars lining up behind a new driver. In this case, the low interpretation numbers aren’t surprising, as the expression is still quite new.

64% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 83% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly interpreted the meaning of “to go back to the drawing board” as “to start over” in the sentence “Time to go back to the drawing board since that didn’t work out.” The 19% difference implies that 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were either significantly more familiar with the expression or simply more able to make sense of it. There were no characteristic mistakes to discuss, as most students who didn’t provide a correct interpretation wrote that they didn’t know what the expression meant. According to Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert (2010), the reason L2 learners tend to have trouble with figurative competence lies in the conventionality criterion, because what might be a common expression among native speakers, might not be such a common utterance among L2 learners, leading to a lack of familiarity with figurative language (pp. 318-319).

In the final sentence, both groups fared similarly, seeing as 52% of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and 55% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students correctly interpreted “to cover your bases” as “doing everything necessary to ensure success,” “plan accordingly” or “leave open options” in the sentence “It’s better to cover your bases in case things don’t pan out well.” In this case, students may have done better if they were provided with more context for the utterance. As Gardner and Winner (1978) found in their study on metaphoric competence in children, situational context allowed subjects to interpret metaphors more easily, than if there was no context at all (p. 132).

The results of the study indicate that, while many students consider themselves familiar enough with metaphors and less familiar with metonymy, they had a much easier time interpreting metonyms than metaphors. On average, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students did slightly better in interpreting both types of figurative utterances, but also had a tougher time with metaphors, which might be

because they are far less literal than metonyms. Kecskes (2000, as cited in Cieślicka, 2006) has suggested that, due to the lack of metaphorical competence in L2, second language users are more likely to rely on literal meanings of figurative utterances and on their LI conceptual system when producing and comprehending figurative phrases (Cieślicka, 2006, p. 119).

Because students were asked to self-evaluate themselves in the first part of the questionnaire, the results of the second and third questions (Do you consider yourself familiar enough with metaphor/metonymy...) were very subjective and based on preconceived notions the participants had about these forms of figurative speech. Intriguingly, while students considered themselves more proficient with metaphors than metonyms, the results of the study seemed to indicate the opposite. The reason for this might be that students had a cognitive bias towards metaphors, which lead them to assuming that they know more about metaphors than metonyms, since the term “metonym” is presumably less well-known among students, as opposed to the term “metaphor.” As Dunning et al. (2003) noted:

People base their perceptions of performance, in part, on their preconceived notions about their skills. Because these notions often do not correlate with objective performance, they can lead people to make judgments about their performance that have little to do with actual accomplishment. (p. 83)

In a study conducted by Dunning et al. (2003), students were asked to assess how well they did on an exam before they left. Students who didn't perform well tended to overestimate how well they had performed. The explanation offered is that the skills necessary to produce correct answers were also the skills needed to recognise wrong ones (pp. 83-84). 97% of the participants of the study conducted for this paper circled “yes” when asked whether they considered themselves familiar enough with metaphors, yet the results of the metaphor comprehension test indicated that this may not be the case. Dunning et al. (2003) explain this phenomenon as follows:

However, we have found that people's estimates of their performance arise, at least in part, from a top-down approach. People start with their preconceived beliefs about their skill (e.g., "I am good at logical reasoning") and use those beliefs to estimate how well they are doing on any specific test. (p. 86)

Seeing as how the majority of participants circled “yes” when asked whether figurative competence was important for teachers and translators, it stands to reason that students are willing to put more effort into mastering figurative competence, as they deem it a skill necessary for their future occupations, but the results of this study indicate that they consider themselves competent

enough already, while this may not be the case. Students may not try to develop their figurative competence further if they already consider themselves familiar enough with figurative speech, because, as Dunning et al. (2003) found in their study, “perception of performance, not reality, influenced decisions about future activities” (p. 86).

## **7. Conclusion**

The importance of this study lies in determining the fact that English students value figurative competence highly, not only for everyday speakers, but especially for translators and teachers. The study has found that while students would say that they are, on average, familiar enough with metaphors and slightly less familiar with metonymy, they were able to interpret metonymy far more readily than metaphor, indicating that there should possibly be more focus on developing figurative competence, with special focus on metaphor comprehension. On average, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students performed slightly better than 1<sup>st</sup> year students at interpreting most figurative utterances, but the difference in ability was not too large. These findings indicate that more focus should be put on the development of figurative competence. Generally, students seemed to have issues with interpreting utterances they weren't familiar with. A common reason for the inability of students to interpret metaphoric expressions is their unconventionality, meaning that it would be necessary to familiarise students more with metaphoric expressions in order to develop their competence further.

Finally, the study has found that 1<sup>st</sup>, as well as 3<sup>rd</sup> year students consider figurative competence to be an important skill for everyday speakers, but even more important for teachers and translators, which is especially important to point out, as these are the occupations these students will be occupying in the future. Teachers have a responsibility to impart knowledge on their students and translators are often faced with figurative expressions, which they must make sense of to translate them accurately into another language. Furthermore, as figurative competence reflects the user's proficiency and mastery of a language, it stands to reason that students who value it highly as a skill of teachers and translators strive to achieve higher mastery of this skill. One of the factors holding the further development of the students' figurative competence skills back may be the fact that students generally considered themselves competent enough already, which is a belief that may have serious implications for the students' further language development. This misguided confidence in their figurative competence skills may



mean that students will not put in the necessary effort to master the nuances of figurative speech, which could limit their overall language proficiency in the future.

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## Appendix

Circle which study year you're on: 1                      2                      3

Date:
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What other course are you enrolled in (German, Philosophy, History...)

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1. Would you say you're familiar enough with metaphors?

Yes

No

2. Would you say you're familiar enough with metonymy?

Yes

No

3. Figurative competence refers to the ability of recognizing the meaning behind literary devices. Do you think this is something that you were taught well at this faculty?

Yes

No

4. Do you consider figurative competence important for everyday speakers?

Yes

No

5. Do you consider figurative competence important for translators?

Yes

No

6. Do you consider figurative competence important for teachers?

Yes

No

7. Metonymy is "a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated" (1)

Write what you think the following metonyms mean:

0. He got burned by the sun.

He got burned by the heat of the sun.

1. They were auctioning a Picasso.

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2. The Crown is well respected in England.

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3. He was the best gun in the West.

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4. My father used to smoke a pack a day.

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5. It's a rough day on Wall Street.

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6. The pen is mightier than the sword.

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7. We'll need more hands at the farm.

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8. I love reading Shakespeare.

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9. The White House has declared chocolate chip ice-cream a national treasure.

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10. We don't give out orders, that's up to the brass.

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8. Metaphors are “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.” (2)

Write what you think the following metaphors mean:

0. He got burned by the sun.  
He got burned by the heat of the sun.

1. Your sister is an early bird.

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2. He's always been a chicken.

---

---

3. It's time you hit the books.

---

---

4. You're on the ball.

---

---

5. Just bite the bullet and get it over with.

---

---

6. No cutting corners this time.

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---

7. No reason for you to get bent out of shape.

---

---

8. New drivers tend to be parade-makers.

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9. Time to go back to the drawing board since that didn't work out.

---

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10. It's better to cover your bases in case things don't pan out well.

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