

Within-culture variation in English sports metaphors: A window to history, culture, and national identity?

Marcus Callies (Freiburg)

While most work on variation in metaphor has examined cross-cultural differences in metaphorical mappings (with a focus on the conceptualization of emotions), the typical sociolinguistic parameters of variation (e.g. social class, region, ethnicity, gender, style) etc. that are likely to produce metaphor variation have remained an underresearched topic in cognitive linguistics to date (Kövecses 2005). That cognitive linguistics can no longer afford to ignore social variation in language as it manifests itself in usage data, however, is also evident in the emergence of Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Kristiansen & Dirven 2008, Wolf & Polzenhagen 2009) as new (sub)discipline.

The present paper is a modest attempt to look into patterns of use and variation in English sports metaphors in national varieties of English. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the pervasiveness of sports metaphors in American English due to the importance of competition in this society (Hardaway 1974), assuming an underlying metaphor for life in the United States “LIFE IS PLAYING A GAME” (Ching 1993), or “LIFE IS A SHOW” as a metaphor at the heart of American culture (Kövecses 2005). Sport is without doubt an important part of a nation’s (popular) culture, and numerous studies have shown the importance of sports (metaphors) in the construction of national identity e.g. in political and media discourse (Blain, Boyle and O’Donnell 1993, Bairner 2001, Charteris-Black 2004). Assuming that “a community’s figurative language could be considered as a reflection of that community’s conventional patterns of thought or world views”, and that “the high frequency and diversity of a particular metaphor can sometimes be taken as a reflection of a country’s history [...] or even its national stereotypes” (Boers 2003: 235), sports metaphors seem to be an ideal testing ground for the interaction of language, culture, history and national identity, hence a topic that lends itself to interdisciplinary research.

Analysing a number of metaphorical expressions which are typically found in different types of sports (baseball, cricket, and football) – as evidenced by their use in national newspapers – the following questions will be tackled:

- Are there any differences as to the salience/prominence of specific source metaphors across the varieties of English studied? Are these reflected in frequencies of use of metaphorical expressions?
- Is there evidence for a convergence or even erosion of cross-cultural differences in metaphor usage as a result of ongoing economic and cultural globalisation (Boers 2003:236)?
- Are there candidates for “stay-at-home” vs. “exported” metaphorical expressions as claimed by Liu & Farha (1996)?

References

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