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Designing an Artificial Language:

# Metaphor

by Rick Morneau

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[The following essay is a heavily edited compilation of several posts I made to the Conlang mailing list in June 1993. The Conlang list is dedicated to the discussion of the construction of artificial languages. To subscribe, send an email message with the single line:

SUBSCRIBE CONLANG *your name*  
to [LISTSERV@BROWNV.M.BROWN.EDU](mailto:LISTSERV@BROWNV.M.BROWN.EDU) . ]

I love metaphors! They're such interesting food for thought and serious discussion. Among some aficionados of artificial languages (henceforth ALs), metaphors may have even achieved the status of sacred cows. Well, you know what they say: sacred cows make the best hamburger!

The problem is that some people feel that the use of metaphor in ALs is unavoidable. I disagree. In fact, I feel that the use of metaphor in ALs should be avoided at all cost.

As native speakers of a language, we use metaphor without effort, mostly because the metaphors are in common use: "prices rise, soar, plummet, nosedive", "the work is uphill, downhill or at a standstill", many people "drown their sorrows" and end up "in tears", etc. The simple fact is that we always know when we use metaphor creatively. It's when we repeat commonly used metaphors that we are not aware that we are using them. In this respect the metaphorophiles are right - it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to stop using metaphor in **your native language**.

When you study a new language, however, one of the first things you learn is that the new language uses words differently, and that you can't translate things so literally. You quickly

develop a knack for knowing when you can translate literally and when you cannot. This process is natural, and happens without conscious effort on the part of the student. The same will happen when you study an AL, if the AL is designed and taught properly.

When you start learning a new language, you quickly learn to avoid use of metaphor, and primarily limit yourself to literal language. As you develop proficiency in the language, you learn which metaphors are allowed, and you learn about the system of rules that govern their use. This is difficult and takes a lot of time and practice.

Thus, there is a two step process in learning a new language. First, you learn to avoid the use of metaphor altogether. Second, you slowly learn how to use metaphor in the new language.

In learning an AL, you must stop after the first step. You do **not** make the transition from literal language to metaphor, since an AL will not have a metaphoric system. If anything, you learn how to avoid metaphor even more.

In other words, when you study a natural language, you **must** learn which metaphors are allowable. When you study an AL, you must learn to not use metaphor at all, which is much easier.

As for the pointlessness of trying to avoid metaphor, think again. If you use metaphor in your AL, and if you have an international audience, then many of your listeners/readers will misunderstand you.

Consider simple examples like "he's as big as a mountain", or "he's as tall as a tree", or "he barks like a dog". I doubt if anyone will have a problem with these metaphors, since the concepts are simple and involve easily visualized and well-understood physical entities.

But what about a metaphor involving a "sapling"? Does the metaphor imply "wiry strength", "suppleness and adroitness" or "bendability and flexibility"? Different people will interpret it differently, depending on their world-view.

Even "obvious" physical metaphors won't always translate. How about "the ships plowed through the waves"? Are you saying that the ships moved easily, quickly and smoothly? Or are you saying that the ships moved slowly, with great difficulty, and with lots of shaking and rocking, like a real plow?

Professional translators are very much aware that metaphor almost never translates. Sometimes it simply sounds like gibberish. At other times, the metaphor is completely misunderstood. If you have any doubts about this, then spend a little time at a library and look up some books on the

theory and practice of translation. You'll get an eyeful! (An eyeful of what? Will you be blinded by the light? Will bugs or dirt get in your eyes? Will your eyes get sore from the strain? Go and find out for yourself! :-)

Here's one book that I highly recommend:

**Meaning-Based Translation: a guide to cross-language  
equivalence by Mildred L. Larson, University Press of  
America, 1984 ISBN 0-8191-4300-6**

There are many other books on this subject, but this is the most comprehensive and easiest-to-read that I know of.

The book has a chapter on metaphor, and discusses the difficulties involved in translating them from one language to another. By the way, Larson speaks of "simile" (sometimes called "analogy") as a form of metaphor. Among linguists, the word "simile" is subsumed under "metaphor". In other words, a simile is one of several types of metaphor.

Larson gives several examples of how metaphor (including simile) are misunderstood depending on the natural language of the listener. For example, if you literally translate "John is a rock" into another language, you could be saying that he doesn't move, that he can't talk, that he's always there, or that he's very strong. If you say "John is like a sheep", you could mean that he has long hair, that he is a drunkard, that he doesn't answer back, that he follows without thinking, or that he's a young fellow waiting for girls to follow him(!). The interpretation will depend on the language spoken by the listener, and the interpretations given above are the ones that Larson is familiar with for those two metaphors. If you were to search through all of the world's languages, you'd find many more interpretations for metaphors using "rock" and "sheep".

When you create metaphors that are not as obvious (calling John a "sheep" or a "rock" is a pretty obvious metaphor, even though the meaning may be misunderstood), the problem gets even worse, and literal translations are even more likely to be misunderstood or not understood at all.

A sentence on page 250 sums up the whole problem:

"Not all metaphors and similes are easily understood. If they are translated literally, word-for-word, into a second language, they will often be completely misunderstood."

Keep in mind that this is when you translate from one natural language into ONE other language. When you are speaking/writing in a AL intended for use as an International Auxiliary Language (henceforth IAL), your audience is likely to consist of people who speak many languages. In

effect, you will be translating into all of those languages, and it is extremely unlikely that your metaphor will be understood by all listeners/readers.

So, when I say that metaphor should be avoided in IALs, even so-called "transparent" metaphors using prepositions, I'm not kidding. Also, you cannot depend on your intuitions to tell you that a particular metaphor is "natural" or "universal". What may seem universal to a Frenchman may be gibberish to a Korean.

If you don't believe me, or if you feel that I'm exaggerating the problem, go to a library and dig up some books on translation theory. You will quickly learn that you cannot have an **international** language **and** use it to literally translate metaphors from a **natural** language.

Sorry, but that's life, and I don't like it either. :-)

Finally, if you are designing an AL for use as an IAL, then you'd better make sure that it's vocabulary is rich enough (and easy enough to learn!) to deal literally with all aspects of communication. If you allow people to import metaphoric usages from natural languages, you'll just end up with a lot of confusion.

[Several days after I posted the above, I posted the following addendum.]

Question: Can metaphor be translated? If so, how is it done?

Well, as it turns out, you **can** translate metaphor, but you have to be careful that you do it right. And if you do it right, you can also use metaphor in an IAL, although it may not be easy, and the result may not be as concise as you'd like.

There are basically five ways to translate a metaphor. I will illustrate them below with the following sample sentence:

*The ship plowed through the waves.*

1. Translate the metaphor exactly, word-for-word. This will work only if the metaphor makes sense in the target language. For an IAL, this situation will almost never occur unless **every** listener has the same native language as the speaker.

2. Re-phrase the metaphor as a simile. This helps some of the time, but only in languages where metaphor is rarely or never used. (I remember reading once about a pidgin language spoken somewhere in the South Pacific, in which the speakers never use metaphor (No - I don't have references, so don't ask). Even worse, these islanders refuse to believe anything even slightly metaphoric. If this is true, then my guess is that the mother languages of the people among

whom the pidgin developed were so different that metaphor from one language almost always sounded like gibberish to speakers of the other mother languages. As a result, they quickly learned never to use metaphor at all. And although this may be an isolated (exaggerated? hokey? untrue?) case, translators are well aware that some languages use metaphor more heavily than others. How much they can differ is unknown, and I doubt if anyone has ever done a cross-linguistic study.)

So, translating the sample metaphor in the form of a simile would give us something like:

*The ship moved through the waves like a plow.*

You don't gain much here, except for those target languages in which metaphor is more explicitly marked. The basic metaphor, however, must still exist in the target language. Again, this is not a solution for IALs.

3. Translate the metaphor into an equivalent metaphor in the target language. For example, in target language X, you may be better understood if you rephrase the example as "The ship ravaged through the waves" or "The ship pushed through the waves like a battering ram". Again though, this will not work for an IAL, unless all of your listeners are native speakers of language X.

4. Translate the metaphor using literal language. This, of course, gets the point across, but destroys the imagery of the metaphor. In this case, our example might look something like "The ship moved through the waves slowly, powerfully and with difficulty". (That's sort of what this metaphor means to me - your mileage may vary.) This approach will always work, even for IALs.

5. Use the metaphor, but provide all necessary referents so that any listener will understand it. In effect, you must explain the metaphor to those who might not understand it. In this case, our example could sound something like "The ship moved through the waves, slowly and powerfully, like a plow being pulled through the hard earth". This approach will also work with IALs, but is more difficult and more verbose. (You also take the risk of sounding like a pompous fool, especially if all you want to say is "Please pass the salt". :-)

Anyway, perhaps there's hope for you metaphorophiles after all. You'll just have to work a little harder at it.

[Postscript: In spite of all of the above, there may yet be another way that metaphor can work properly when used in an IAL. It can work if the metaphoric system of the AL is **precisely** defined. In effect, you must provide a "syntax and semantics" for the metaphors of

your language in which you will precisely define how metaphors can be created and how they should be interpreted. However, since a comprehensive analysis of the metaphoric system of a **natural** language has never been done (to my knowledge), I doubt if providing such a system for an AL is technically feasible.]

End of essay