Cross-linguistic influences on the acquisition of metaphorical expressions

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This study aims to explore possible cross-linguistic influences on the acquisition of conventionally used metaphorical expressions by Chinese learners of English at different levels of proficiency. Previous literature on cross-linguistic influences (e.g. Jordens and Kellerman 1981) and bilingual lexicon (e.g. De Groot 1992) makes different predictions regarding the transferability of metaphorical meanings of a lexical item comparing with the literal meaning. In particular, it is not clear whether learners are able to acquire the metaphorical meaning in a non-guided way when they already acquired the literal meaning of the same lexical item.

An acceptability judgement task with sentence correction components is used to examine whether the learners accept different types of metaphorical expressions, and how they correct the incorrect use of metaphorical expressions. Preliminary results show that the acquisition of metaphorical expressions resides in between the acquisition of literal meanings of lexical items and that of idioms that are semantically opaque. The participants demonstrate different types of cross-linguistic influence: they are able to discriminate expressions that are available in different languages and select different strategies when correcting the given expressions. While participants’ general proficiency is an important factor for cross-linguistic influence, it influences the acquisition of metaphorical expressions in an imbalanced way when learners encounter some language-specific metaphorical expressions. An asymmetry between the acquisition of literal meaning and metaphorical meaning of a lexical item is also observed, which is shown by the lower acceptability of metaphorical expressions that are available in both the L1 and the L2 in comparison to the literal counterparts.

References:

Keywords: metaphor, second language acquisition, bilingual lexicon, cross-linguistic influence.