

What May Words Say, or What May Words not Say. A Corpus-Based Approach to Linguistic Action¹

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I present an empirical approach to the analysis of the way English speakers conceptualize the communicative process in English. Most linguistic expressions about language in English are surface manifestations of what Reddy termed the “conduit metaphor”. Reddy's model implies several interrelated cognitive associations: words are conceived as containers in which speakers introduce their ideas and send them to listeners, who will take these ideas out of these containers. Central to this model is the metaphor words are containers. It has also been claimed that there are other ways of perspectivizing the language process apart from the notion of containment (Vanparys 1995). In fact, Reddy himself notes that there is approximately a 30 % of metalanguage not based on the conduit metaphor. The pervasiveness of the container metaphor would reasonably be most directly tested in expressions with the lexeme word. In order to measure what falls inside and outside these containers I carry out a corpus analysis of the lexeme word excerpted from the British National Corpus (BNC). The systematic evidence obtained from a large but delimited corpus gives us more reliable information about the frequency and use of this metaphor than an intuition based analysis or an arbitrary search in multi-source corpora.

1. Introduction

1.1. Delimitation

Conceptual metaphor theory claims that there is a general tendency to reify abstract elements. In order to do so we relate them to other concrete experiences with the use of figurative language:

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5).

The need to apprehend things make us delimit them. When we describe an object to another person we make use of our hands to show shape, proportion, etc. We try to reify it in front of our listener. Delimitedness is an important cognitive device which, as other concepts, leaves its traces in grammar. Lakoff remarks that people assume that concepts like love or anger are presented metaphorically, but they do not realize that other concepts like time, quantity, etc. are understood metaphorically, and are usually part of our grammar:

Most people are not too surprised to discover that emotional concepts like love and anger are understood metaphorically. What is more interesting, and I think more exciting, is the realization that many of the most basic concepts in our conceptual system are also normally comprehended via metaphor—concepts like time, quantity, state, change, action, cause, purpose, means, modality, and even the concept of a category. *These are concepts that enter normally into the grammars of languages*, and if they are indeed metaphorical in nature, then metaphor becomes central to grammar (Lakoff 1993: 212) (emphasis mine).

Tenny (1987: 113) uses the concept “spatial delimitedness” to explain boundness: a count noun like *apple* refers to a spatially delimited thing, while *snow* describes something which is undefined in extent, it has no clear boundaries. However, this concept is not so clear when we consider abstract entities. Whatever makes us think about ideas as delimited and knowledge as an entity lacking boundaries is rather arbitrary. In fact the latter is ruled as a count noun in Spanish (*el conocimiento/los conocimientos*). These grammatical bounding rules that are valid for nouns are also applied to predicates, and are usually discussed under the rubric of telicity. Atelic activities like mass nouns have minimal parts: a subpart of the event of singing is still an event of singing, if you just sing a part of it you have performed the process of singing, but telic events like *sing a song* do not; if you only sing a part of a song we can not conclude that you have sung a song. This process has also been observed in the adjectival domain. Wyngaerd (1998) explains that there are also bounded and unbounded adjectives. An intensifier like *very* that qualifies unbounded scales shows the distinction: you may say *the door is very big*, but not **the door is very open*, since *big* is not bounded whereas *open* is.

Delimitedness is, however, not totally fixed in grammar. Mass nouns like atelic predicates can be delimited by means of grammatical devices, like the use of phrasal

determiners, as in *a bottle of water, a piece of meat*. But there is a much more direct way of bounding these entities: the use of metonymy. Thus, in a proper context, a restaurant, we may hear *two coffees, a lamb and two porks*. The SUBSTANCE FOR OBJECT² metonymy makes us relate the unlimited liquid or meat to a limited portion of it as served in a cup or on a dish without the use of grammatical devices. As Radden (2005: 16) points out “grammatical properties of lexical items apply prototypically, not categorically, i.e. words tend to be flexible with respect to their grammatical properties.” He explains the metonymic blending of examples like *three beers* as cases of what he terms the BOUNDED SUBSTANCE FOR THE SAME KIND OF THAT SUBSTANCE metonymy. Like Tenny, he also emphasizes the spatial nature of this metonymic blending: “The boundaries separating different portions of the substance are thus purely spatial” (2005: 16). Figurative language is here used as a fast delimiting device.

We are bounded physical beings and we tend to assimilate anything unreachable to our closest reality. Central to this idea of boundedness is the concept of container, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 29) state:

We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation

Langacker (1991) considers the container metaphor as one of the most influential on our way of thinking:

The concept of a discreet container, whose rigid sides define a sharp boundary between an inside and an outside, underlies both set theory and formal logic, as well as the classic criterial-attribute model of categorization (1991: 508).

Our language is consistently adapted to this reification and delimitation procedure. But not all language users conceive the same ways of accessing reality; as a result, not all languages will follow the same procedures. As mentioned above, the grammatical behaviour of abstract or even concrete entities is not necessarily the same in different languages. Thus, *knowledge, furniture* or *news*, just to mention some examples, are categorised as mass nouns in English, whereas Spanish speakers face the same entities as grammatically delimited.

1.2. Creativity and Metonymy

Language is inherently human, or *vice versa*, as Wierzbicka (1987: 1) puts it “homo sapiens is, essentially, homo loquens, a speaking being”. A definition of man must include the language ability, and any reference to language must necessarily be understood as a reference to human beings. There is, therefore, a metonymic relation between language and man: language is a product of man. Thus, words, for example, are viewed as objects belonging to the person who utters them, as we can see in the first definition of *word* in the

Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

I. Speech, utterance, verbal expression. 1. collect. pl. Things said, or something said; speech, talk, discourse, utterance; *esp. with possessive, what the person mentioned says or said*; (one's) form of expression or language (emphasis mine).

Language is a product of human beings and may be grammatically treated as a personal belonging, therefore metalinguistic lexemes, like *word* are frequently introduced by the possessive. This personal treatment of language reveals its creative nature. As opposed to a non natural language like a programming language, the user may decide to express his/her ideas or feelings in an unlimited number of ways. Linguistic acts, unlike mathematical formulae, do not have to be accurate. Language users may decide to be efficient or imaginative; they may want to transmit thoughts or feelings. For example, a taxi driver who took me to the airport in a hot summer day in Seville used the following expression:

(1) *Estoy harto de volante* (“I am fed up of steering wheel”).

The metonymy would be quite insignificant uttered by any driver. The mention of a steering wheel to refer to a vehicle is quite natural, since it is the part of the car with which we have a most direct physical contact when we drive. But for a taxi driver, the steering wheel is not only part of the driving, but also his/her companion during the long hours they wait in line in taxi stands. Metonymy has been described as an “abbreviation device”, which “enables us to say things faster, to shorten conceptual distances” (Nerlich, Clark and Todd, 1999: 362). But the metonymy used by the taxi driver is not only the fastest way to say it, but also a creative way of expression, which adds a personal flavour and a feeling that an expression like *car* would not provide.

On the other hand, the famous “the ham sandwich wants his coffee now” uttered by a waiter in a café is a metonymy probably used as the fastest way to locate the customer. Metonymy here works as a quick identifying device. It requires a lighter cognitive effort than metaphor since it appears within a single domain, following Kövecses (2002: 145) definition:

Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain, or idealized cognitive model (ICM).

1.3. Aims and Methodology

Since language is such an important activity for human beings it will consistently be a recurrent topic among language users. Its abstract nature, on the other hand, makes it less accessible, so it tends to be described through metaphorical descriptions. Reddy's (1979) influential work on metalanguage (i.e. the language we use to talk about language) is

conceptualized in terms of what he terms “the conduit metaphor”, which comprises three interrelated metaphors: IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, WORDS ARE CONTAINERS, and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING (these containers through a conduit). He estimates that about 70% of the language we use to talk about the English language is based on this metaphor. Although the examples he offers are convincingly enough of the pervasiveness of this model, his listing of the metalingual resources of English, as he himself claims, is partial. A further search for expressions of this kind, which Reddy claimed to be needed, was performed among others by Goossens *et alii* (1995). Their systematic search for figurative expressions related to linguistic action in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* yielded 1916 entries. Their aim was the analysis of conventionalized rather than creative metaphors. My aim in this paper is also empirical and based on a corpus. But I want to concentrate on one part of the conduit metaphor, the container conceptualization, and for this purpose I will search for what is expected to be one of the most productive source domains of the metaphor, the word. Besides testing the pervasiveness of this concept, I want to find out, what other domains are activated in these figurative expressions. I have chosen a subcorpus of oral English from the BNC to see how much of our daily talk about language involves conventionalized metaphors and how much of it is “creative”. It is not the purpose of this analysis to offer a survey of conventional metalinguistic metaphors as found in dictionaries³ but rather to zoom into one single source domain for linguistic action and search for other ways of viewing language. Conventionalized metaphors are used automatically without activating figurative reasoning, whereas other metaphoric expressions created *ad hoc* may better reveal the speaker’s perception of language.

This corpus-based approach involves both quantitative and qualitative analysis in the line proposed by Charteris-Black (2004: 34):

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are necessary for the investigation of metaphor. Qualitative judgements are necessary initially to establish what will be counted as metaphor. Then quantitative analysis can allow us to measure the frequency of a metaphor in a corpus and to estimate the extent to which a particular metaphorical sense of a word form has become conventionalised.

In the following section I offer a brief reflection on language and the elements that take part in the communicative process.

2. The communicative process

Since language is such a central part of human beings, references to our speaking abilities abound in our daily life. Curiously enough in *El Quijote* the third most frequent lexeme is *dijo* (“said”), and the fourth *respondió* (“answered”).

Speaking is the most direct way of communication. When we speak we make a sound by physically moving our mouths. It is a central claim of conceptual metaphor theory that

metaphors are based on bodily experience. In this line, we frequently talk about our language metonymically through the organs that take part in speech: tongue, lips and mouth:

- (2) There were no medals for Felipe to win for his country but he put Spain on the map, his name *on every tongue*. (BNC: h\hg\hgk 46)
- (3) As Bismarck said, "I have always found the word "Europe" *on the lips* of those who wanted something from other powers which they dared not demand in their own name'. (BNC: a\am\amk 72)
- (4) Malcolm taught me things as well. Things like how not *to mouth off* about any ideas you might have. (BNC: a\af\afe 54)

There is a general view of speaking as an act of sending air, as in breathing, (5), more emphatically stated through verbs like *cough*, *sigh*, *gasp*, or *spit* as in (6). The mouth is viewed as a container metonymically understood to discharge words (cf. Martínez Vázquez 2005).

- (5) "Darling!" breathed Jay, drawing her close, searching for her adorable lips again, "stay with me. 10.377 (BNC: a\ao\ao1 25)
- (6) "You've made me mad now!" Simon spat out the words. (BNC: a\ac\acb 50)

As Rudzka-Ostyn (1988a: 514) observes:

The domains of acoustics and space frequently interact when they extend into speech acts. The interaction is brought on either by a spatial particle or preposition..., or a verb denoting discharge of some substance: (9) Come on, cough it up, we know you are guilty.

2.1. Communication as transfer

The transfer idea implied in communication does not necessarily originate from the physically observable fact that we send air in the act of talking; it may rather arise from our conception of communication as a social activity (from Latin *communicare*, "to share") which involves a second person, the listener, who, following our picture of communication is conceived as a "receiver". Vorlat (1982: 12) emphasizes the need for this element: "In every communication scene a receiver is conceptually required".

Therefore, an interchange of communication involves at least three nuclear elements: sender, message and receiver. Jakobson (1960) completes this picture of the communicative act by remarking that the message has to be related to a context, and must be put into a code common to the speaker and the receiver. Finally a contact enables addresser and addressee to communicate. Dirven *et alii* (1982: 4) offer a wider perspective:

...a sender transfers information to a receiver: this information transfer is presented as a

message and/or topic or evaluation; the information is transferred via a channel, put down in a code and possibly caught in a textual conveyor. The whole process takes place in a given socio-cultural context, at a specific time and place, in a certain manner and under certain circumstances; the sender may have a certain purpose and the receiver may be affected by the result of the information transfer.

Communication considered as a whole is thus faced as a transfer process. But references to our linguistic acts may focus on any element of the communicative process. We may wish to emphasize the channel, by using a verb of instrument of communication like *telephone*, (7); concentrate on the speaker's difficulties to express him/herself in examples like (8); focus on the listener's reaction to the process, as in (9), or highlight the mood of the speaker by choosing a manner verb like *yell*, *scream* or *bark*, (10),

- (7) Yesterday's bomb went off 20 minutes after *a warning was telephoned* to Waterloo railway station that there was a device at the Stock Exchange. (BNC: a\ak\ak2 2)
- (8) ...and then I shall be loosed from *this dumbness that binds my tongue*, and I shall be able to say to her what needs to be said, and what as yet I cannot say. (BNC: k\k8\k8s 48)
- (9) His *sharp tongue* and piercing, blue-eyed stare have *shot down* many an opponent. (Cobuild: newspaper)
- (10) The platoon commanders *barked their orders* to dismount and the vehicles came to an abrupt standstill amongst the enemy. (BNC: a\7\77 46)

2.2. The conduit metaphor

Reddy (1979) made an important step forward in the analysis of the communicative process by claiming that English conceptualizes communication in terms of the conduit metaphor:

(1) language functions like a conduit, transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another.

(2) in writing and speaking, people insert their thoughts or feelings in the words; (3) words accomplish the transfer by containing the thoughts or feelings and conveying them to others.

(4) in listening or reading, people extract the thoughts and feelings once again from the words (1979: 290).

According to this view language is structured around the following metaphors: COMMUNICATION IS SENDING IDEAS, IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, and WORDS ARE CONTAINERS. The speaker puts ideas into words and sends them through a conduit to a listener, who takes the ideas out of the words. Reddy supports this theory with examples like the following:

- (11) That *thought is in* practically every other word. [10]
- (12) Try to *get your thoughts across* better. [1]
- (13) Whenever you have a good *idea*, practice *capturing it in words*. [4]

(14) Try to *pack* more thought into fewer words.[6]

He observes that even though there are ways of avoiding these conduit “metaphorisms”, which he estimates in a 30 percent of our expressions about language, “this would still not free you from the framework” (1979: 299). In fact, as Lakoff and Johnson state, we are not conscious most of the time that we are using this model:

This[the conduit metaphor] is so much the conventional way of thinking about language that it is sometimes hard to imagine that it might not fit reality. But if we look at what the conduit metaphor entails, we can see some of the ways in which it masks aspects of the communicative process (1980: 11).

In the following section I will proceed with a corpus analysis of the lexeme *word* in order to find out what is hidden in our linguistic expressions about language.

3. Corpus analysis

The present corpus analysis explores the figurative uses associated to the lexeme *word* in a sample of 471 sentences excerpted from oral texts in the BNC. Oral language has been chosen for its spontaneity. The metonymic extensions of the lexeme *word* found in this corpus have been grouped into different classes. In order to complete the qualitative and quantitative analysis two larger corpora containing more than 10.000 sentences with *word/words* extracted from oral and written texts from the BNC will be examined with the help of Wordsmith Tools. Three words to the left of each occurrence will be observed in order to analyse the words which combine with this lexeme (see appendix A and B). When they do not belong to the metalinguistic field its figurative sense will be analyzed.

The lexeme *word* has been chosen because word forms are central units of language; as such they are taken as representative of linguistic expressions in general. Words may be regarded as semiotic symbols, as in the following definition from the OED:

A combination of vocal sounds, or one such sound, used in a language to express an idea (e.g. to denote a thing, attribute, or relation), and constituting an ultimate minimal element of speech having a meaning as such; a vocable.

As such they are treated as concrete linguistic elements, which may take shape in writing or as sounds produced in speaking. The following examples illustrate these non figurative uses:

(15) Read it. That's the longest word in the dictionary. (BNC: k\kc\kce 66)

(16) Every time you hear the word election, you start to cringe! (BNC: k\kc\kcn 82)

Sometimes they are defined temporally or sequentially, identified by the time when they were uttered or by their position in a linear sequence.

- (17) Going back to your earlier words about the illustrations and the message... (BNC: f\fy\fyb93)
(18) The last words my mother found to say... (BNC: f\fu\fu5 56)

Almost half of the uses of this lexeme are clearly figurative (45.3%). The rest of the examples in our corpus are not evidently literal. They are not metaphorical because words are not combined with a lexical item suggesting a source domain outside the linguistic domain. But, most of the associations we find in our corpus are metonymic in nature; either clear metonymies or metonymies derived into metaphors (cf. Goossens 1990 and Barcelona 2003), and metonymies frequently go unnoticed. Besides, some of the examples which were classified as non-figurative at first glance were found to involve some type of non-literal language. Thus, if we consider for example (18), words are viewed sequentially, as in the order they follow in speech, but at the same time, the sequence may be extended to cover a whole life, so that “last words” designates the final speech act in a person’s life. Finally, there is a colloquial phrase of surprise appearing three times in our corpus, which I have not been able to explain:

- (19) Oh yes, yes five hundred in a bay. *My word!* Mm. That's a lot isn't it? You know. Do you still do some of then Len? (BNC: k\kc\kc0 74)

The main association found in relation to the lexeme *word* is one of contiguity; words are part of language, therefore the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy will be activated most of the time. In some cases the metonymy is lexicalized, for example, when we take the lexeme to mean the text of a song as in:

- (20) I know, it was fantastic. erm but I I think er it was the words they were singing. (BNC: f\fx\fxr 97)

I have classified the examples into three main groups based on the three core elements of the communicative process: the message, the speaker and the listener, which are the three elements that every speaker is conscious about.

3.1. The message

3.1.1. Words in the conduit

In Reddy’s conduit metaphor theory words are containers where we put ideas. Lakoff also develops this idea: “THE MIND IS A CONTAINER, IDEAS ARE ENTITIES, and communication involves taking ideas out of the mind, putting them into words, and sending them to other

people" (Lakoff 1987: 450). Goossens (1994: 387) actually claims that containment is perhaps the main ingredient in the conduit metaphor, which "implies that it should be more adequate to speak about the container metaphor than the conduit metaphor" (1994: 388). As discussed above, the conduit metaphor is a means of reifying our view of the communicative process which involves a complex system of metaphorical mappings. The following metaphors are part of this model: COMMUNICATION IS SENDING IDEAS, IDEAS ARE OBJECTS and WORDS ARE CONTAINERS. We probably will not find linguistic expressions with all these associations activated at the same time. It is possibly the idea of motion the one which prevails in English linguistic expressions, as proved by Rudzka-Ostyn (1988a); perhaps due to intrinsic linguistic reasons (cf. Martínez Vázquez 2005).

In our corpus there are several examples of words conceived as moving objects. These examples can be understood as linguistic manifestations of the COMMUNICATION IS SENDING IDEAS metaphor:

- (21) However they can be used just as "wallpaper" to fill the screen while the words *carry* the message. (BNC: f\fu\fua 25)
- (22) ...and usually the words didn't make any sense, and they *passed through his mind* so quick (BNC: f\fy\fy 92)
- (23) ...no presence that disturbs me no other voices, words-as-strangers *flaring through the hiss of distance* (BNC: f\fu\fu5 19)

The WORDS ARE CONTAINERS metaphor, however, does not appear in linguistic expressions as frequently as expected. In our corpus, there are 48 occurrences of the set phrase "in other words". This phrase is the most frequent cluster found in two larger corpora of around 10.000 examples each: corpus B with 610 occurrences and corpus C with 747 (see appendix A). This expression suggests the idea of containment because of the presence of the preposition *in*; however a closer analysis reveals the phrase as a conventional means of finding a much more precise manner of explaining things. As a gain-time device it is often repeated:

- (24) But if the goods are faulty what you're entitled to by law is money back. A cash refund *in other words*. So that you're, *in other words* you either, you're, by having the money back in your hand you are then restored to the position you were in before you bought the goods in the first place.

The phrase is also found six other times with the possessive *but*, as in the previous examples, without necessarily implying an idea of containment:

- (25) *In your own words* describe the image that this extract gives. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 14)

Another example where words might be understood as containers is (26). However, another possible reading would lead us to interpret the phrase as expressing state rather than

place, as “in writing”, without an idea of containment.

- (26) The History essay is a logical argument *in words* which demonstrates historical knowledge, skills and understanding. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 60)

In other examples with the phrase “in words”, (27) and (28), I find it also difficult to detect a clear idea of container, while it seems easier to understand them as expressions of state, as in the phrase “in linguistic form” or instrument, as in “with words”.

- (27) Learned gestures can often be restated *in words*. (BNC: f\fu\fua 57)
 (28) ...my aim in the book was to describe these mental images *in words*, with the help of familiar analogies and a few diagrams. (BNC: f\fy\fyx 23)

The preposition “in” is frequently used in an extended sense expressing state, in phrases like *in love*, *in trouble*, *in ink* or, *in italics* (cf. Downing and Locke 1992: 600 and Quirk et al. 1985: 685, among others). This association originates from the primary metaphor STATES ARE LOCATIONS (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Primary metaphors are the basis for many figurative associations, many of which, as Grady (2005) claims, “we hardly notice are not literal”. I suggest that speakers using expressions of the type “in words” are not clearly conscious of the original idea of location implied by the preposition “in” but rather relate the phrase to similar expressions like “in ink” or “in italics”, so that state rather than containment comes to their minds.

Besides, words are frequently taken as instruments used to communicate. In corpus B *with* ranks as the forth most frequent preposition introducing the lexeme words, (341 occurrences); in corpus C it appears in fifth position with 251 occurrences. Another instrumental reading is detected in the presence of the verb *use*, which is the first most frequent verbal collocate in both corpus B (195 occurrences) and C (196 occurrences).

One of the most cited examples of the container metaphor probably involves the phrase *put into words*. Surprisingly, in a search of the entire BNC corpus (100 million words), there appeared only 56 occurrences of this phrase. The following examples illustrate this use:

- (29) He felt a vague disappointment which he couldn't put into words. (BNC: h\ht\hty 86)
 (30) I had hunches which were difficult to put into words. (BNC: h\h9\h9n 47)
 (31) “I-“ It was hard to put into words what had been until so recently just a thought at the back of her mind. . (BNC: j\jx\jxv 93)
 (32) Jenny knew more than she was prepared to put into words. (BNC: f\fs\fs9 46)
 (33) Then, in her attempt to experience more closeness to her husband and to drive him to understand what she felt like but *could not make conscious or put into words*, she did to him what had been done to her. (BNC: b\bn\bnf 70)

A detailed analysis of these sentences reveals that what people want to *put into words* is

always something unreachable like thoughts or feelings, as found in (29)-(33). The expression means “define”, “explain”, as a way of reifying the abstract, as defined in Collins English Dictionary, “to express in speech or writing as well as thought”. So the phrase as is presently used may simply activate in the speaker’s mind the formal part of the combination form-meaning that each linguistic unit entails. Lexical items denoting linguistic units, as Goossens (1994: 392) signals, “conceptualize the *combination* that is characteristic of *all* the symbolic units of natural language, viz. the combination of form and meaning (‘content’).” As such, they can be used metonymically for either of these two parts. This mapping as Goossens claims is “in principle, independent of the container metaphor.” Besides, we could claim that as a fixed expression it is used automatically, and that the speaker/listener is not aware of any figurative meaning. As Curse (2000) points out:

If, however, a metaphor is used sufficiently frequently with a particular meaning, it loses its characteristic flavour, or piquancy, its capacity to surprise, and hearers encode the metaphorical meaning as one of the standard senses of the expression. (2000: 42)

3.1.2. Words are quantified

The lexeme *word* is a count noun, therefore, it should not surprise us to find it with the indefinite determiner *a*. However, the metonymy WORDS ARE SPEECH is generally activated. When words stand metonymically for speech, the lexeme becomes a conceptually mass and abstract notion. As discussed in section 1.1, the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy helps delimit an unbounded element. Likewise, speech may be delimited by taking a part of it, a word. The expression *have a word* appears 26 times in our oral corpus; 66 in corpus B and 47 in corpus C. It usually means more than just a brief interchange of communication, typically uttered in confidence; it also implies that it will bring about a change of some type, as in the following examples:

- (34) But where are we gonna go before Friday love? Mum just *have a word* with dad and I’ll find somewhere to go! (BNC: k\kc\kcf 42)
- (35) Oh it’s bloody dangerous, very dangerous stuff ! Twenty five. Well at least he can *have a word* with him about it and see what and he can do (BNC: k\kc\kcf)

The minimizing effect is stressed by the use of *little*, which produces an ironic effect in the following example:

- (36) Ah! Oh! Policeman *having a little word* with a sa , motorcyclist down here by the looks of it! Where? On the corner. (BNC: k\kc\kcb)

Speech can also be quantified by larger amounts as in (37) and (38). When speech is ceaseless the source domain is a river, (40)-(41). This metaphor is also suggested in another

example with the opposite image, the idea that when you do not have words/ideas you dry up, (42).

- (37) I mean I hated him, I really did and when he turned round and he said ooh Keith wants *a few words* I said to Elaine, look shit's gonna be it (BNC: k\kc\kcp71)
- (38) ...there are *an awful lot of words* left over! (BNC: f\fu\fu3 30)
- (39) ... it forces you to reduce *the bulk of words* and yet preserve the essential meaning of the text. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 31)
- (40) These points are lost to the reader in the *torrent of words*. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 75)
- (41) Jack listened, and after a while he began to make out the quick *flow of words*. (BNC: b\bp\bpd 60)
- (42) Yeah, if they come up to you with a microphone and say would you like to say a few words for the television programme yourself I wouldn't *I'd dry up* I wouldn't know what to say (BNC: k\kc\kcs 17)

3.1.3. Words are shaped

Words in writing may be measured as long or short words without using any figurative device, as in (15) above. However, words can also be given a figurative size. Recall the use of *a little word* in (36). In our corpus there are three occurrences of the phrase “big words”, referring to difficult words, probably based on the fact that English words are short, whereas words coming from other languages, typically from Latin or Greek, are longer and are also considered superior. The primary metaphor IMPORTANT IS BIG (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:50), which associates importance with size explains the appearance of “big” instead of “long” in this expression.⁴

- (43) Excuse me just because the tape's on there's no need for you to use *big* words like prognosis. (BNC: k\kd\kd0 39)
- (44) Antidisenstablishmentarianism. Oh, not your big word. See that's her *biggest* word she knows. (BNC: k\kp\kpg 87)

Primary metaphors are acquired in our early childhood automatically and unconsciously. As Lakoff and Johnson state (1999:57):

We have a system of primary metaphors simply because we have the bodies and brains we have and because we live in the world we live in, where intimacy does tend to correlate significantly with proximity, affection with warmth, and achieving purposes with reaching destinations.

Primary metaphors are not based on similarity or analogy, but on experiential correlation; they are entrenched conceptual associations motivated by recurrent correlations in experience and they can be combined to larger structures building complex metaphors.

(Grady 1997, 2005 and Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999).

3.1.4. Words in isolation

Besides the major framework of the conduit metaphor, in which ideas and feelings are contained in words or in human heads, Reddy proposes another minor framework which “overlooks words as containers and allows ideas and feelings to flow, unfettered and completely disembodied, into a kind of ambient space between human heads” (1979: 291). He conceives three categories in this minor framework, one of which views thoughts and feelings as existing independently of human beings. In our corpus we find the following examples where words work by themselves as isolated from the speaker/writer:⁵

- (45) And we mustn't let words and other fashionable elements, become too dominant. (BNC: f\fy\fyb 50)
- (46) Words like these occur constantly in historical writing. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 21)
- (47) But the words on the page didn't have the power to blot out the crack of hunting guns she was beginning to hear again inside her head, nor make her forget the sight of the blood trails on the hot plain. (BNC: f\fu\fu8 59)

3.2. The speaker

3.2.1. Words inside the body

Words are sometimes seen as coming out of another container: the body. Since “each of us is a container” as Lakoff and Johnson –quoted above– state, and words contain ideas which are products of our mind, it is common to find words as created inside our body and coming in and out of it (48)-(52), even with our breath (53).

- (48) These words keep *coming into my head!*” (BNC: c\ca\cad 73)
- (49) The words had all *tumbled out*, one upon another. (BNC: c\c8\c8s 29)
- (50) Almost before the words *had left her mouth*, she felt a stab of excitement. (BNC: a\as\asd)
- (51) We'll take the very words *out of your mouth* (BNC: f\fu\fu6 43)
- (52) Nathaniel Sherman jabbed a thumb against his own chest and his words *came out* in a fierce undertone. (BNC: f\fu\fu8 77)
- (53) Don't *breathe* a word. (BNC: k\kc\kce 53)

There are two examples in our corpus in which the speaker keeps the words inside this body-container.

- (54) I lean close, as if to trigger that drained face or dredge whatever words she might be *holding still* for me to hear (BNC: f\fu\fu5 28)

- (55) What was she saying, Irene, what was she going on about, in words *half saved, half drowned* - in gasps and whispers? (BNC: f\fy\fyv 22)

Another metaphor in our corpus relates words to food, which is not strange since they share a common domain: the mouth, which is viewed as a container for both words and food.

- (56) Do the characters speak very quickly? Do they *swallow* their words? (BNC: f\fu\fua 22)
- (57) ...either one way or the other, and er er er you didn't er you didn't m *mince* words about it, did you not, I mean you. (BNC: f\fy\fjy 24)
- (58) I'm I think I'm talking about the words first of all. I think we can all get the *flavour* of what the message is (BNC: f\fy\fyb 45)

Kövecses (2002: 72-74) represents the perceived structural similarities between the abstract concept of idea and the concrete concept of food which motivate the metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD in the form of the following mappings:

- (a) cooking _ thinking
- (b) swallowing _ accepting
- (c) chewing _ considering
- (d) digesting _ understanding
- (e) nourishment _ mental-well being

The food metaphors which appear in examples (56)-(58) entail the following mappings, which are also based on the structural similarities between an abstract element, word, and a concrete entity, food:

- swallowing _ not pronouncing clearly
- not mincing _ speaking clearly and directly
- flavour _ meaning

This food metaphor, like the communicative act, is bidirectional. Thus, the speaker may swallow his/her words, meaning that s/he keeps them for him/herself; and conversely the listener may not swallow them, or allow them to enter his/her mind, thus not believing them.

In a more elaborate metaphor, words inside the body are perceived as threads, as in

- (59), though this source domain is not necessarily located inside the body, as in (60).
- (59) Bored, sullen, resigned, I listened. Then suddenly the words *wove* within me, transporting me through another's imagination. (BNC: f\fu\fu7 43)
- (60) It was only years later, after becoming a Christian, that I was able to *clothe* that feeling *with words*. (BNC: b\b2\b2g 65)

The clothe metaphor in (60) is another mapping relating the abstract (words) with the concrete (clothe). This association is not new as we can see in the definition supplied by the OED for *clothe* (8b) “To put (thoughts or ideas) into words; to express in (or with)” and illustrated by the following examples:

1671 Milton *P.R.* ii. 65 *Some troubl'd thoughts which she in sighs thus clad.*
 1673 Ray *Journ. Low C. Pref.*, Mr. Willughby's voyage which he himself would doubtless have cloathed with better language.
 1741 Watts *Improv. Mind* (1801) 212 *Clothe those ideas with words.*
 1771 Junius *Lett.* lxi. 316 *Clothe it in what language you will.*
 1779 81 Johnson *L.P.*, Dyer *Wks.* IV. 212 *Cloathing small images in great words.*
 1850 H. Rogers *Ess.* I. iii. 102 *He has clothed the determinate quantities of arithmetic in the universal symbols of algebra.*

In (59) we find a different type of association; language is viewed as a web whose threads are words woven together. Notice that the verb *weave* shares its root with *web*. The web metaphor suggests the image of a construction made out of threads which are linked together. The most prototypical image is probably that of a spider web and the main ingredient is that of a strong interconnection. The metaphor WORDS ARE THREADS WEAVING A WEB directly relates to the etymological meaning of syntax, from Greek *συνταξις*, and Latin *constructio*, which means to link, to join together.

3.2.3. Words belong to the speaker

Quite frequently language appears as owned by the person who utters it, as if the words, once uttered, belong to the person who pronounced them, (61). This emphasizes the fact that speakers create their own discourse, since ideas may be transmitted in many different ways. In our corpus there are 24 examples of the lexeme introduced by a possessive determiner (5%); a look at the collocates of corpus B shows *his* as the third most frequent first word used to the left of the lexeme *word*, 236 cases. It is interesting to note, however, that *her* follows in position 15 with only 64 occurrences. The possessive is sometimes used especially with “very” to show the exact words without change or manipulation, (62). A similar expression related to literalness is *word for word*, found once in our corpus, (63).

- (61) *Whose words are these?* (BNC: fk\kc\kcu 93)
- (62) It was urgent - a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his *very* words: official business and no questions asked (BNC: f\fu\fu6 9)
- (63) That's exactly right. You know it *word for word*. (BNC: k\kb\kb8 17)

As objects, words can also be weighed, which is figuratively used to express careful analysis in (64).

- (64) The phrasing got so slow and emphatic that you knew that she wanted you to listen to and *weigh up every single word* (BNC: a\ar\ar2 64)

In the conduit metaphor words are presented as moving objects, travelling from the speaker to the listener. According to this view, an object which is perceived as heavy will move with difficulty, therefore causing communication problems, as in (65). This mapping is an elaboration of the primary metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) or DIFFICULTY-AS-HEAVINESS (Grady 2005). In (66), the speaker equates his failure to communicate to difficulty in moving the words around.

- (65) There is a *heaviness* of words not said between us, dragging us higher though the air (BNC: f\fu\fu5 1)
 (66) She proved immune to my lightheaded but rather leaden gallantries, *the words so hard to shift around*. (BNC: f\fy\fyv 83)

3.2.4. Words are ideas

The container metaphor presents words as containing ideas; sometimes the word is directly taken as the idea that is contained in it. Lakoff and Turner term it the WORDS STAND FOR THE CONCEPTS THEY EXPRESS metonymy.

- (67) Oh . Well I And I, and I *believed every word* of it. Ha! Ha! Well, I couldn't know that, I didn't know. (BNC: k\kc\kch 72)

Sometimes words share the human features of the speaker:

- (68) ...you couldn't tell if each word was freighted with anger, or bitterness, or joy (BNC: a\ar\ar2 64)
 (69) ...these are vital because we tend to use words in a fraudulent manner. Words demand to be treated with great truth. (BNC: b\bm\bmy 11)

According to Lakoff and Johnson the meaning of words is objective, and if communication is not felicitous it is due to subjective errors:

Meanings are objects. Linguistic expressions are objects. Linguistic expressions have meanings (in them). In communication, a speaker sends a fixed meaning to a hearer via the linguistic expression associated with that meaning. On this account it is possible to objectively say what you mean, and communication failures are matters of subjective errors: since the meanings are objectively right there in the words, either you didn't use the right words to say what you meant or you were misunderstood (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 206).

In our corpus words are described as right or wrong:

- (70) That's okay, she's also given me the *right words* to use to put it through urgently, okay (BNC: k\kb\kb7 91)
- (71) Very, I would say it's not depressing that's the *wrong word* (BNC: k\kc\kcp 63)

However, communication does not appear to be this simple. Even though sometimes language is seen as intuitive, as in (72), it usually appears as something that does not come automatically. On the contrary, it implies a considerable effort on the part of the speaker, who has to search for the words that best fit the concept s/he wants to transmit, (73)-(76). The result of the search may also vary, (77).

- (72) Grim and forbidding were the two well-used *words that came to mind* as she looked up at the building for the first time (BNC: f\fy\fy 81)
- (73) He looked at her then. You like it? It's- She *searched for the words*. (BNC: f\fy\fy 1)
- (74) She had *chosen* her words with calculation in an attempt to break the impersonal barrier... (BNC: f\fu\fu8 49)
- (75) Mhm. Erm he forgets, he knows the word but he can't get it Get out. out. Yeah. (BNC: k\kb\kb8 37)
- (76) They said outright what I could not find words for. (BNC: f\fu\fu7)
- (77) GUIL: You'd be lost for words. ROS: You'd be tongue-tied. GUIL: Like a mute in a monologue (BNC: f\fu\fu6)

Our examples reveal a general tendency to view language as obscure, with words not transmitting a precise meaning, as mathematical symbols, but rather presented as ambiguous elements which may hide something:

- (78) Such words can *hide* a wealth of meaning. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 55)
- (79) Metaphors, descriptive words and even nouns can lead to *vagueness and ambiguity* for the reader (BNC: f\fu\fu3 21)
- (80) Reject those words which *obscure* rather than clarify meaning-words which are only present for purposes of style, linguistic sense (BNC: f\fu\fu3 86)

3.2.5. Words are promises

Words once reified are also treated as tokens which comprise a promise. As tangible elements they are given, taken, kept, broken, (81)-(83), yet they are valued as true or false,

- (84) The possessive introducing them signals the person who makes the promise.
- (81) "But I've got to keep looking. After all, I did give my word. (BNC: f\fr\frm 16)
- (82) ...something like these accounts have erm have been audited but only erm we have taken the word of Mr that what he said is right. (BNC: k\kc\kct 15) he was able to keep his word. (BNC: a\ac\ace 47)

- (83) ...his support was sufficiently strong to withstand accusations of breaking his word and of disloyalty (BNC: a\ap\ape 5)
- (84) The man was true to his word. (BNC: b\bm\bm 76)

3.2.6. Words are limited

Failure to communicate is sometimes expressed as a lack of language resources. The speaker claims that there are things which cannot be expressed through language, underlining the lack of correspondence between signs and reality, with the former being limited while the latter is unlimited. This failure in communication is illustrated in examples (85)-(87). In corpus B and C we find clusters like “there is/was no word”, “there are/were no words”, which illustrate the speaker’s perspective.

- (85) ... there were *no words* that could easily describe the helpless terror that she felt as the side-gate opened before them and the ambulance had driven through. (BNC: f\fy\fy 81)
- (86) Pete and me had been together for eleven months and loved each other more *than words could say*. (BNC: f\fu\fu 20)
- (87) What do you expect me to say? But her gaze was *beyond words*; even if he said nothing at all, she could read him with ease. (BNC: f\fy\fy 98)

3.3. The listener

3.3.1. Words are balls

Most of our metalanguage concentrates around the speaker, but sometimes the emphasis shifts to the listener. In this section we will discuss some linguistic expressions in which the listener is particularly implied. In line with the conduit metaphor, which involves the metaphors IDEAS ARE OBJECTS and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING IDEAS, some expressions relate to the way the listener receives these ideas/words as objects “caught”, “missed” or “picked up” almost as in a ball game, (88)-(90). The primary metaphor which motivates these expressions is UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).

- (88) Are you in pain? The reply is a blur of distress the only words I catch (not wanting to) but - doctor - I don't know... (BNC: f\fu\fu 73)
- (89) She misses more words out than she gets in! And she just writes over them in, in pen! (BNC: k\kb\kb 77)
- (90) ... when I'm in Italy, I, I can't speak Italian very well, but when I'm there a week, I pick up words very quickly and although I know my grammar isn't perfect, I can form sentences (BNC: k\kc\kc 19)

3.3.2. Words are weapons

Probably one of the most pervasive metaphors related to the listener is WORDS ARE WEAPONS. In (91) and (92) words have stings. In (93) the attack is not physical.

- (91) Nick said, but very gently to *take the sting out of the words*, "You're not his mother."
(BNC: f\fu\fu2 99)
- (92) *Stung by his father's words*, Chuck dashed forward across the clearing. (BNC: f\fu\fu8 78)
- (93) Duclos' eyes narrowed as he registered *the undisguised threat in the recruiter's words*; then he forced a laugh to his lips. (BNC: \fu\fu8 92)

In (93), we find another concept associated to words in their relation to the listener: the fact that the effect the speaker wants to produce on the listener is usually hidden. Sometimes words are played with to influence the listener, as in advertisements:

- (94) Many advertisements *play* with the meanings of words. (BNC: f\fu\fua 29)

The persuasive effect of words is also present in other expressions:

- (95) These words, I'm glad to say, *had a relaxing effect on her*. (BNC: f\fy\fyv 23)

However, in an oral corpus metaphors are not very elaborate. The more complex metaphor around the listener in our corpus is (96) where the word is taken as a medicine that is dropped in the listener's ear as a poison used to bring about the actions desired by the speaker, with reminiscences of the murder of Hamlet's father.

- (96) A word dropped in the right ear, Nelly told herself, might bring her the job (BNC: a\as\ase 28)

3.3.3. Words are keys

Another metaphor linguistically expressed in a set phrase is *key word* to signal words which are more important, (97). In this sense, the image is not that of a container which may be opened; the word as key will be used to open something else, the meaning of the whole message. This conceptual metaphor can appear in other linguistic forms, as in (98).

- (97) To discover the main points in this writing you must identify the *key* words and phrases that create the mental picture. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 14)
- (98) Words could *open* these strange worlds again. (BNC: f\fu\fu7 44)

In contrast to this concept of words as keys other words are presented as superfluous:

- (99) Your notes, however, should strive to be concise and need to be stripped of *unnecessary* words. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 42)
- (100) ... many documents, especially from the nineteenth century, contain *redundant* words which only serve to confuse. (BNC: f\fu\fu3 85)

Concluding remarks

In order to understand reality we try to delimit it. This constant delimitation procedure has been explained in terms of containment. Lakoff and Johnson state that we put boundaries, “marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface”, even when there is no natural physical limits. They relate this practice to what they consider one of the most basic human instincts: “territoriality” (1980: 29). As an important, mostly abstract, facet of human nature, language is also reified in terms of other more concrete elements surrounding us, but not necessarily as physical containers where ideas are thrown, as implied in the conduit metaphor. In our corpus analysis of the lexeme *word* we have found a richer variety of figurative associations: words are delimited in terms of physical objects, and as such they are quantified, weighed or shaped. They are seen as moving elements, coming out of the speakers mind/mouth and directed towards listeners who, as in a ball game, may catch them or miss them.

As a social activity communication involves a group formed by at least two participants: speaker and listener, who interrelate through language. Our speech acts may pursue different goals as observed by Jakobson. The different functions of language also influence the type of figurative language we construct. Many figurative expressions about language turn around the problems presented for the speaker: words are not precise, they do not easily match our thoughts and sometimes there is no way of finding a correspondence between sign and reality. Communication concentrated around the message views words as isolated from the speaker-listener and working on their own. Figurative linguistic expressions around the listener show words as either helping or hindering decodification. Sometimes words are used to hurt the listener or to influence him/her.

Our corpus analysis shows a general perception of language as not precisely bounded. This lack of accuracy is somehow incompatible with the container image, since a container suggests the idea that something is clearly delimited. Speakers reveal certain confusion about language, they do not believe in the truth and clarity of language, they rather believe that language is obscure and sometimes deceptive. In such a picture words are seen more as “standing for” than as “containing” anything.

It has been claimed that many metaphors develop from metonymies (Goossens 1990 and Barcelona 2003a). Linguistic action metaphors are not an exception. The different metaphors appearing in our corpus involve a first part-whole mapping: the WORDS ARE LANGUAGE/SPEECH metonymy. We have also observed some Primary Metaphors which underlie some of the linguistic action metaphors in our corpus.

Notes

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1. I define this study as a “corpus-based approach” following previous work on this topic by Goossens et al. (1995: vii), who define their studies in this way: “We would like to characterize our book as empirical, because the research it presents is corpus-based, in the sense that it relies on language data which have been gleaned systematically from a variety of sources”. On the advantages of corpus-based research on figurative language see Deignan (1999), Deignan and Potter (2004), and Charteris-Black (2004).

2. As an anonymous reviewer correctly observes, the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy is associated to concrete nouns, which invoke entities made up of a heterogeneous number of parts, whereas figurative expressions with mass nouns are better defined as cases of MATERIAL FOR OBJECT. Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez (2001) refer to this mass for count association as the MATERIAL FOR ENTITY (CONTAINING/HOLDING THE MATERIAL) metonymy in examples like *I would like two beers, please*.

3. A task which has already been performed by Vanparys (1995), although centred on verbs.

4. I owe this remark to an anonymous reviewer. For more information about primary metaphors see Grady (1997) and (2005), and Lakoff and Johnson (1999).

5. A reviewer observes that the ‘power/dominance’ dimension’ should be mentioned in the explanation of these examples and offers the proverb *The pen is mightier than the sword*. It is interesting to note that the opposite is also true *Actions speak louder than words* as in the following example: *Any actions that are speaking louder than his words?* (BNC: k\kr\krl 87). It seems to me that in modern society words are somehow decreasing their power. Example (47) illustrates this loss. Another element that overrules the power of words is image (cf. *A picture is worth a thousand words*).

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Appendices**Appendix A.** Frequency list of clusters with the noun *word/s*

Corpus B

Corpus C

in other words	610	in other words	747
of the word	237	the words of	260
the words of	209	of the word	229
in the words	125	in the words	157
of a word	98	words of the	111
a word with	93	the last word	89
of the words	88	with the words	83
words of the	76	a word of	79
words in the	75	of the words	74
have a word	66	a few words	69
a few words	61	the word of	67
without a word	60	a word with	66
a word of	56	use of the	58
the word of	55	that the word	52
with the words	54	word of god	52
in a word	50	the use of	49
the meaning of	47	sense of the	48
the last word	46	have a word	47
the words in	46	not a word	44
sense of the	44	the word is	44

Appendix B. Frequency list of the collocates of the noun *word/s*

Corpus B

Corpus C

the	3840	the	3472
in	1362	of	1568
a	1170	a	1403
of	1156	in	1233
other	760	other	682
to	574	to	590
and	492	and	414
that	360	that	358
his	357	his	316
with	341	for	270
is	217	with	251
for	205	is	188
not	199	as	177
use	195	by	163

by	191	not	158
these	174	have	155
last	167	or	155
have	151	on	146
on	140	use	145
as	139	her	142