Promoting Urban Digital Culture through Metaphoric Representations

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Abstract

Urbanization gradually generated new needs and resources which, in their turn, led to a significant increase in technological innovation. As a consequence, digital transformations marked a radical change in the way people rethink and reorganize today's society. Such transformations have not only shaped our lives but also influenced our cognitive status. We intuitively conceive and develop new concepts on the basis of metaphor. As a means of cognition, metaphors help us conceptualize things. The visual representations of what we perceive play a very important role in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. By linking language to thinking and visual images, cognitive metaphor theory opens up the possibility for metaphor to serve as a vital methodological tool in investigating metaphoric representations.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor; source domain; target domain; metaphoric representation; mapping; digital culture; urbanization.*

1. Introduction

In dealing with metaphoric representation, it is impossible to avoid mentioning the views of important linguists and philosophers like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 1999), but also theories exposed by linguists such as Ortony (1993), Kövecses (2008), Fauconnier (1997). Hence, the present investigation is founded on the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics, more precisely, on conceptual metaphor. Analysing conceptual metaphors, we can understand the ability to adapt to new technology by transforming metaphor into a

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conceptual tool and underlining its potential to re-structure and create new realities. Innovation cannot be understood without concepts and imagery. As a consequence, the unknown is experienced in terms of other concepts that are concrete and more accessible to our comprehension. If we lack metaphors, we do not have concepts for new phenomena and metaphor truly is the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning.

Given its close relation to our way of thinking and understanding of the world, metaphor plays a major role in both our thinking and in our conceptualization of scientific matters. The existence of a relationship of resemblance between two separate domains facilitates the conceptual structuring of one domain in terms of another. Metaphor becomes a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualize the world and their activities.

The linguistic analysis of the metaphorical representations is relevant for the present study as the cognitive view has an important relativist role within the process of meaning interpretation and has the merit of bringing linguistic theories closer to cultural studies.

2. Theoretical background

In attempting to reveal a comprehensive cognitive-oriented analysis, the present investigation will emphasise the relationship between metaphor and thought and the role of metaphor in science. Metaphoric conceptualization in terminology preserves metaphor even in interpretation. Metaphors oversimplify things and this is what the cognitive view highlights: the place of metaphor "is not in the language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings (Ortony 1990: 203). This cross-domain mapping is grounded in the body and everyday experience and, because of this, some mappings tend to be universal, though some of them remain culture specific. Starting with Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor has come to be defined as a mapping across domains, where

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each mapping becomes a set of ontological correspondences between the entities in a source domain and those in a target domain. As a result, metaphor is an indispensable basis for natural language and semantics.

Contemporary research reveals that metaphorical expression refers to a linguistic expression that is the surface realization of that cross-domain mapping. In fact, the mappings bring into correspondence elements that belong to the relations established between the elements of two domains (the source and the target domains). It is the merit of Cognitive Linguistics which views metaphor as a matter of conceptual mapping from a source domain (a concrete one) to a target domain (an abstract one) while, the metaphorical expressions are the primary results of such mappings. Viewing language and thinking as a unity, cognitive metaphor theory allows metaphor to serve as a methodological tool with the help of which people are able to make systematic metaphorical conceptualizations.

Our research intends to identify universal cognitive mappings that work across the language as a whole by investigating Romanian students' metaphorical representation of the Internet and of the digital devices they use. The main interest of our research has been to notice and analyse the way in which students conceptualize the Internet and technology according to their own needs. Thus, while attending the practical courses of English, at "Vasile Alecsandri" University from Bacau, regarding the way in which they perceive the Internet (the digital world together with all its devices that govern their everyday reality) students shared the way in which they perceive this phenomenon with great enthusiasm and creativity. Having a different professional formation due to their study programmes - Humanities and arts and Information Technology - their answers gave rise to different perspectives based on their personal experiences and cognition.

3. Cultural framework (an overview of the digital era in the urban culture)

We live in a world of continuous transformations. Computers, digital devices, smart devices and other technologies are indispensable

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tools when it comes to communication, work, finding information, enjoying entertainment, online shopping, E-commerce and even education. This high-tech development, not only as a reference to computers but also to the Internet, has pushed every field of knowledge a step forward. We are in fact, witnessing the future we were only dreaming of, in the old days. We are now offered solutions for almost any problem. Artificial intelligence invaded our daily lives influencing the way we use our smartphones, drive our cars, use social networks and even shop online, having a huge impact on our decisions but making us more practical, productive and functional. It is the merit of the Digital Revolution that we are given the opportunity to use technology in every aspect of our lives. All these changes have a major impact on us, on our society as a whole, our urban space.

Travelling through cities is easier nowadays thanks to smart devices and applications based on electronic filing systems with records that can be easily sorted and thanks to virtual environments with ID verification encryption or with translation and other services based on voice processing.

As technology improved, designers of video games strove to use a variety of methods to combine art and technology in order to communicate particular messages and create impressive representational graphics and visual images to approximate the physical world, allowing their players to form knowledge of the space in general and, of concrete places in particular. Practically, videogames succeeded in creating a pattern of how we form knowledge of our environment by perceiving, conceiving and experiencing the virtual reality exactly as we do in reality. Thus, videogames become cultural products of societies governed by interactive media, societies which shape their urban culture and cities by mixing and transferring elements from both virtual and real worlds. Thus, the high-tech architectural style has consolidated as the most popular style in virtual reality, which in its turn, has materialized in reality. As a consequence, concepts which were

previously unthinkable and unattainable became pieces of art continuing to monopolize/dominate urban areas.

4. Metaphorical representations of the Internet

The technological advances and changes so far created a new generation of users with different cultural perceptions and beliefs. Having an effect on almost everything we do, digital technology has become part of our everyday living. Computers, for example, have fundamentally helped people complete their tasks at hand much more quickly but, at the same time, they have altered the way we live and work, by transforming its fierce users into computer addicts. Visual metaphors emphasizing the human face as an interface are present everywhere in mass media drawing attention to a concerning phenomenon: the massive exposure to digital devices. Reports show that the use of digital media, including interactive and social media has negative effects on people's health, destroying the young generation. Computers and smart devices appear as extensions of the human face and sometimes they even replace the head. Using the face as an object of perception is an extremely powerful image from a metaphorical point of view because the face symbolises 'the mirror of the soul', it is the visiting card which says everything about a person, being linked with the image of a social group. Moreover, the human body is a powerful centre of metaphorical extension as well as attraction. By substituting the face with a screen we obtain an anthropomorphic metaphor in which the transfer of meaning takes place from the face together with all its senses to inanimate objects. The metaphoric representation of our example draws comparisons to the psychology of the human mind. The visual metaphor emphasizing the interaction between people and smart devices becomes an illustration of the modern man who is constantly connected to the social media network, representing a kind of icon for the dark side of the internet together with all its negative effects upon human health. The reality is harsh, the global image of cyberspace has connected the human environment and the computer within the time internal of their coexistence. However, due to computers, the former

homo sapiens has turned into a kind of *homo cyberneticus*. Consequently, we should not forget that it is in our power to use technology as a gift and not as a trap. Since metaphor is more than just words, metaphorical representation is a natural process and, given the universal experiences associated with certain circumstances, they are likely to produce conceptual metaphors. Thinking that smart devices create addiction, we instinctively interpret such situations in terms of the conceptual metaphor SMART DEVICES ARE PRISONS. People are unconsciously lead towards depression, they get to spend more time online than in reality, they do not even realize that they are trapped until it is too late. By viewing smart devices as prisons, our physical world remains outside us. Each of us is a container and so are the rooms. We conceptualise our visual field as a container and conceptualize what we see as being inside it. This metaphor emerges from the fact that being trapped by an addiction like this, feels like being trapped in a chat room, trapped in a virtual reality, 'a reality' we cannot escape from.

All the changes brought by the digital technology have not manifested only in the human's behaviour and perception of the world around but also in their vocabulary and language. Driven by the cyber culture, the young generation has come to use a language of its own. They simply appear to play with words and even invent terms that sound like other terms or seem to be governed by the same rules. Examples like *cyberpunks*, *poke me*, *like me*, *tag me, tweet me, share it with me*, *google it,* labels like *it's face time* or *the perfect time for an insta-story* are examples which prove that internet is all that matters for Zuckerberg's generation. The vocabulary is subjectively felt as metaphoric and, apart from becoming a kind of internet slang, such expressions demonstrate that the internet provides valuable cultural information about a certain type of generation. Teenagers are especially dependent on social media; they expose their life a little too much without thinking of possible consequences. The Internet becomes a way of living, 'a companion'. This behaviour reminds us of a Romanian saying: a man is known by the company he keeps. The conceptual metaphor that underlines this

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situation is INTERNET IS A PERSON/ A COMPANION because, even if it is user driven, internet acts as a centrifugal force, attracting and dominating its most enthusiastic users by simple inertia. We could think of this as the personification of internet. Regarded as a type of ontological metaphor, this personification illustrates that the physical object is specified as being a person. Thus, the entity in the source domain is mapped onto the target path. Conceptualising the internet in terms of a human being, we comprehend a wide variety of experiences in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities. Personification is a general category that covers a wide range of metaphors, each of them emphasizing different ways of looking at a person. Hence, the internet may acquire all the semantic features of a human be they positive or negative; the internet may be friendly, helpful, generous, alien, awkward, dangerous and so on. Personification can be also perceived as a form of ontological metaphor. What is important to observe is that ontological[1] metaphors allow us to make sense of a phenomenon in terms of human and on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions and characteristics. Ontological metaphors are, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson beautifully underline, natural and pervasive in our thought being taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena. The fact that they are metaphorical never occurs to us (1980: 29). Nevertheless, metaphors are more than just words and, metaphorical representation is a natural process. As a result, and given the universal experiences associated with certain circumstances, they are liable to produce conceptual metaphors.

The Internet is a many-sided phenomenon and, being considered a way of living, it becomes an essential /indispensable tool. For some people, internet has become a valuable commodity like money. INTERNET IS not only A RESOURCE but also a source of

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[1] Note that ontologic metaphors are one of the three categories of conceptual metaphors identified by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). The other two categories are structural metaphors and ontological metaphors.

earning money or, why not, of gaining new followers. In terms of metaphoric interpretation, internet passes gradually from the image of a valuable resource to a time-consuming activity or even to a life threatening habit and, to some 'wise internet gurus', to a source of money by selling products online, by owing blogs and vlogs, websites, online businesses or by even testing games. The metaphor INTERNET IS A RESOURCE is culturally grounded in our experience with material resources. This is a structural metaphor that also employs an ontological metaphor of the type INTERNET IS A TIME- CONSUMING RESOURCE because it allows us to view time and online activity/work as substance metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson indicate that, the quantification of labour in terms of time, together with the view of time as serving a purposeful end, induces a notion of LEISSURE TIME (1980: 67). Extrapolating this idea, we could say that INTERNET IS LEISSURE TIME, a productive way of saving up. By no means, the internet is a way of living which makes it serve as a concept for life, morality, wealth, learning, etc. INTERNET IS LIFE becomes a conceptual metaphor highlighting internet's place in the life of each individual. Internet is as essential as water, or as the air we breathe. The cultural model underlined by this conceptual metaphor is that of a way of living. The metaphoric representations can be accounted for by the structural similarity between domains. As a source domain, the internet becomes the conceptual domain which organizes and informs the unknown in terms of something more familiar. Consequently, life becomes a basic concept because the internet seems to have become part of it. INTERNET IS LIFE shows that the structuring of our understanding of the internet comes from the structure of our knowledge about the life. According to one's own needs, this conceptual metaphor gives birth to a series of interpretations: the internet is air, the internet is fun, the internet is alive, the internet is a waste of time, the internet is death, the internet is weird, the internet is dangerous. These are reflections of systematic, metaphorical concepts that structure our actions and thoughts given on our life experiences. Life is a biological process; it

characterizes living organisms. Life is a sum of experiences, life may become fragile and it may stop. In the same way, internet has certain effects on us. Apart from all the advantages brought by the internet, there are also drawbacks. The Internet is brainwashing us; fake news deliberately misleads the public in an attempt to manipulate it. The Internet has become a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for the interaction between individuals and their personal computers no matter their location. Anyone can voice their opinion on social websites. False information is spreading through web applications like WhatsApp. However, we have to learn to deal with such controversies and learn how to select the correct and objective information instead of absorbing everything or taking all for granted. INTERNET IS GOOD OR BAD but, above all, INTERNET IS WISDOM/ KNOWLEDGE because we need rational thinking in order to make systematic correlations with our experiences. This metaphor could allow us not only to quantify or orient concepts but also to structure and understand the hidden aspects and to reason them. Being rational we have to fight for what is true, correct and moral, we should not let things to degenerate. We are emotional human beings who reason, we do not possess artificial intelligence, we have to act like 'virtual intellects' on the internet, intellects who take responsibility for their action. The way we reason is grounded in our knowledge and physical experience. By assigning positive or negative value to a concept we could evaluate our example as being a structural conceptual metaphor because all conceptual metaphors map structure onto the target concept. On the basis of such correspondences, we can give an account of a range of possible metaphors.

Given its role in modern society, the internet is not a luxury but a necessity. Being a necessity, nobody should deny someone's access to it as long as digital devices simplify life and help societies evolve. The evolution comes from the speed with which it develops. INTERNET IS SPEED and accessibility. When surfing the Web, internet can get us everywhere we want to go. Speed is a key word, whether we refer to accessibility, evolution, download and upload or to the digital

technologies used in reality by developed countries in the case of physical travelling.

Terms like "cyber-space" and/or "virtual space" define the notion of a world of information that is possible only in digital form. Desktops, laptops and smart devices connect the whole world by performing multiple operations at once. It is as if the world itself has turned into a network and the internet has become AN OCEAN OF INFORMATION/ A (CYBER)SPACE. Whether, an ocean, a chest, a locker, a shelf or a box, our physical and cultural experience provides many possible grounds for the spatialization of metaphors. The mapping from the source domain of the ocean onto the Internet comes naturally, but also subjectively, since internet is as huge as the oceans, deep and dark, and even dangerous for 'unexperienced sailors'. Literally speaking, the internet is a global system of interconnected computer networks, while metaphorically speaking, internet gets its own spatial structure becoming both substance and container. These are real or assumed similarities that work automatically or unconsciously or, as Fauconnier beautifully highlights: we are not just conceptualizing an already given domain in a certain way, we are actually building it so that it fits the mapping (1997: 20). Whether arbitrary or natural, the mappings are, for sure, correlated with our bodily experiences in the physical world.

This "ocean of information" praised by everyone may not be accessible to all of us. Unfortunately, given the lack of investment, poverty, or unaffordability, "offline areas" do exist. Such situations prove the existence of a huge gap between urban and rural areas. This has been more evident during the lockdown due to the pandemic context generated by Covid-19, not only in rural areas but also in some urban areas in the case of Romania. It is absolutely necessary for any active member of the modern society to be able to use the computer system, in data or information processing and management, otherwise a digital division takes place. Apart from accessibility and poverty, the division also takes place between young users and elders and, between

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technophiles and technophobes or people who are simply reluctant when it comes to using technology. Nevertheless, the largest pressure is on those who are unfamiliar with data processing. In terms of conceptual metaphors and, given the advantages brought by the internet and its utility in everyday life, INTERNET IS A FORM OF ART which allows its users to interact, communicate, speak up, work, buy and sell, pay and get paid, learn and teach, work, travel, promote, surf the network in order to find information or read, upload and download e-books, visit virtual places, use applications, watch movies, etc. The Internet is the promoter of urban digital culture, while digital culture is part of the largest culturalization process brought by technology and the internet.

People are responsible for what digital culture means for each of them, in case they want to experience new realities and cultural transformations. Whether a technophobe or a technophile, no one can deny the unprecedented scale and importance of internet worldwide (which also resides from the capitalization of the word when used to designate the Internet phenomenon). The Internet has revolutionized the computer and communication world like no other thing before, turning it into a global network of people. Digital communication controls every important socio-economic aspect. Globalization has become a form of urban culture due to internet's ability to unify communities. Once with the widespread of internet, the Internet itself became a global metaphor.

Businesses and governments communicate and interact with each other through a variety of channels. As a result, the volume of information that circulates, reduces distance and time. INTERNET IS ACCESSIBLE which means that boundaries are disappearing and everyone is allowed to have their different views and opinions, but INTERNET IS also MOTION because it is continually evolving. The rise of technology and the internet has produced a global transformation. However, on the one hand, people have the right to free speech, and, on the other hand, other users do not follow the same path, they extract the information and they throw it back as they want to, in an attempt to

manipulate people through media. As a result, the internet establishes new boundaries, new hierarchies, while new activists are seeking to attract more 'followers' which makes of internet A MEANS OF PERSUASION. It is up to the individual's ability not only to produce but also to extract clear information which then, can be shared on various digital platforms. The Internet makes us vulnerable even when using working platforms, we are exposed to data theft and to being controlled in one way or another.

When studying language and technology, it becomes obvious that technology influences the use of language. A new official language has been born, a computerized language full of various abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons. English has become the universal language of the Internet however, the actual wide use of English tends to divide the world into Internet users and Internet illiterates. A similar phenomenon is present in Romanian language as well, given that various technical terms from the field of IT entered the common language in a process called Anglicization. Adopting technology-related terms gave rise to new vocabularies, new grammatical forms, and new ways of speaking and even writing. Nowhere is the effect of this expansion of English into new domains seen more clearly than in Internet communication. With terms like *virus, antivirus, boot, restart, hard disk, download, upload, update, bookmark, browser or web navigator, web software, hack, ICloud, e-signature, copyright, piracy, torrent, tracking device, sharing, chat rooms, cookies, cyberspace, information highways,* etc., internet language gave rise to many neologisms and expressions that make up a whole new lexicon of concepts. Although such terms are closely linked to a domain that is not digital, their choice proves that new metaphors guide our understanding of digitally related phenomena and mark a series of cultural transformations. The development of the specialised IT language is corroborated with the elements of cultural and social progress. Computer and internet language abounds in terms belonging to medicine, as a result, new meanings arise. Viruses for example, are mapped onto programs, replicate themselves, and, without a good anti-

virus programme, they erase files, having a devastating effect, exactly as real viruses harm the human body. In fact, the expressions making up the new lexicon of concepts may be viewed as applying directly to the new conceptual categories of the target domain. The cognitive theory teaches us that metaphorical reasoning arises when source domain structures are used for target domain reasoning via mappings. Parts of these mappings are embodied in everyday thought and language while others are simply created based on our experiences. Much of our everyday thinking is metaphoric, with different conceptual metaphors used to reflect on different occasions or by different categories of people.

Not only language but also people are influenced by technology. With the continuous battle over minutes and seconds and over busy schedules, that we are experiencing today, everything is centred on speed and efficiency. Enslaved by this speed, more and more people are suffering from the virus of 'fast life' which destroys healthy habits and leads to many lifestyle changes. As a consequence, the computer becomes an extension of the brain, people spend less time at home and have the tendency to do everything automatically. Given the pace of life and the fast-moving rhythm in which we consume our lives, we have to adapt to this chaos. This is in fact the dominant metaphor of today's society, and it is this analogy between man and computer which lead to the conceptual metaphor MAN IS A COMPUTER/ A MACHINE. Although similar in an abstract way, the greatest difference between people and computers lies in the existence of emotions and feelings. There are some similarities between people and computers but only from a figurative point of view: the central processing unit is the brain of the computer, its interface stands for the face, the computer casing is similar with the human skeleton (holding all its components together), the power supply is similar with our circulatory system, the motherboard stands for the nervous system or the operating system which 'dictates its behaviour'. However, we are not robots, we have feelings, we think and we empathise. It would be a pity to let technology take over our lives. So let us leave technology apart, and benefit from it

only when necessary and praise it only for the features that make our life easier. As for the internet, let us enjoy it as if it were a glass of wine: 'surf at pleasure' and use with measure.

5. Conclusions

Urban digital culture is part of our experience with the physical world in terms of what we think and act. We 'coexist' because we need digital technology in order to make our tasks easier and to stay connected with everything that happens around us. Each of us has his own visual representation of what we perceive and, being grounded in our experience and having a strong cultural basis, metaphor opens up new realities which we are free to experience and promote in our own way, especially because every understanding is unique and subjective, exactly as each student who participated in our survey about the metaphoric representation of the Internet.

The students' way of perceiving metaphors through internet and technology use proves that reasoning is a type of linguistic interpretation. The psychological processes involved in our way of making correlations and analogies comes natural and facile due to our embodied experiences. Students' forms of mental representation are based on these psychological infferences. The conceptual metaphors identified in the verbal metaphors created by the students illustrate that we automatically or almost unconsciously assume similarities by linking domains and pairing target concepts and source concepts.

The majority of the students who participated to this study, though having a different professional background, due to their study programmes – Humanities and Arts and Information Technology – gave similar answers, a fact which proves that the young generation is governed by the same principles and philosophy of life, sharing the same hobbies and future goals. They are mature enough to know that the Internet is a (re)source which they have to use by measure so as not to become addicted, they value it for its positive effects but they do not praise it for the negative ones. They are able to separate the good from

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the bad and to use it only for their advantage. They see the phenomenon of the Internet as a form of development validated by the elements of cultural and social progress. They rely on computer and technology because it simplifies our lives and because it offers future prospects for fulfilling almost any dream. Although one might consider that technical minds are usually concise, pragmatic or way too strict, the present study shows that no matter the study programme, the students share the same degree of creativity. This is a possible aspect since we are experiencing a world of tremendous change in terms of technology and not only. In terms of spontaneity, students from Information Technology students proved to be more interested in offering the best answers to illustrate their way of conceptualizing the world of the wide web and the technology that facilitates their learning, as opposed to the students from philology who seemed a little reluctant in sharing their visual representations of the way in which they perceive the digital world in terms of use. This is evident and indisputable since the computer is the most important tool for studying technology. That is why, unconsciously or not, metaphorical representations play an important role in understanding any phenomenon and, moreover, when language, thinking and visual images combine they give rise to a new world of interpretation.

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