A Conceptual Linguistic Approach to the Cultural and Educational Crises Generated by COVID-19

Gabriela Andrioai
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău
Romania

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that, while bad things can happen, it is important to remain positive and see the glass half full rather than half empty. Thus, with the help of the technological innovation, we have learnt to stay connected online and accept that we have to adapt and deal with the challenges faced because of the pandemic. The online environment has become 'our everything', our vital space, one without which work, communication, teaching, survival itself would not have been possible. Consequently, from the negative image projected by COVID-19 that started with social distancing we embraced a more positive perspective brought by the pandemic itself, due to the economic redirection and the changes made by whole societies fighting with or against the tide, from one extreme to another. Having all these in mind, the aim of this article is to prove that, even in such harsh times, online classroom management can still be effective in the digital era (just) as it is face-to-face.

Our research intends to investigate Romanian students' metaphorical representations of the online learning during the pandemic of COVID-19. The main focus has been to analyse the way students perceive the process of education online together with the type of interaction 'behind the desk', and to reveal the advantages brought by online teaching, as well as the disadvantages brought by the impossibility of creating a 'face-to-face' connection.

Keywords: *digitalization; educational crisis; cultural representation; conceptual metaphor; online teaching/learning*.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic generated many cultural changes since its effects have influenced the way in which people around the world go to work, to school, the way they seek for entertainment, and even the way in which they understand the socio-cultural implications of their moral obligations to others. Yet, it is due to this pandemic that a massive digitalization, coupled with emerging technologies, created a new form of cultural experience and opened the door to many future innovations. The impact of Covid-19 on both education and culture accelerated the digitalization process and made it possible for audience to move on-line. Even if the live cultural experience could not be replaced, each sector improved its digital access in an attempt to satisfy the increased demand for cultural information.

Education and technology *shook hands together* in an attempt to re-orient and re-construct the process of teaching. Thus, digital technology became the key element without which we could not have progressed during lockdown when schools had to be closed. The perspective of a newly globalized form of education motivated by the COVID-19 crisis accompanied by economic and socio-political change and supported by digital technology has offered a promising representation of contemporary education.

The didactic pattern gets its guidance from the cultural patterns of society and the changes brought by the pandemic had a great impact on education as well as on the society as a whole. The unprecedented acceleration brought by the digitalization of education has led to all sorts of transformations in the process of education. Teachers had to reshape their lectures in order to attract young learners into a new world, already marked by radical changes in the way people had to rethink and reorganize the teaching process. For some teachers, such transformations left scars, while for others, it led to success. Whether positive or not, such changes had a great impact on people's lives socially, psychologically, culturally and even physically if we take into account the amount of time spent online. Nevertheless, these changes lead to evolution which can only be achieved through education.

The following research intends to investigate Romanian students' metaphorical representations of the online learning during the pandemic of COVID-19. The main focus will be on emphasizing the way students perceive the process of education online together with the type of interaction 'behind the desk', and to reveal the advantages brought by online teaching, as well as the disadvantages brought by the impossibility of creating a 'face to face' connection.

2. Cultural framework and theoretical background

In the light of a new digital era, online learning/ teaching marked a radical change in the way teachers had to re-think and re-organize online lectures and in the way students got to perceive these transformations. In search of innovation, teachers had to combine different learning strategies and activities to accommodate different learning styles and allow significant digital transformations to take place. Such transformations shaped new cultural identities and, at the same time, influenced our cognitive status. Students subconsciously started to conceive and develop new forms of representation on the bases of metaphor. The process of learning acquired new meanings by moving into *virtual classrooms* where *the teacher is live* and *the students are on air*. Online learning/teaching gained new followers and, soon, such metaphors started to govern students' thoughts and words. Their visual representations play an essential role in the way they conceptualize one mental domain (the educational one) in terms of another. Cognitive theory gives rise to metaphor since it serves as a methodological tool in investigating metaphoric representations.

Since George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), the study of metaphor has made great progress in cognitive linguistics. Metaphor has come to be defined as a mapping across domains, where each mapping becomes a set of correspondences between entities in a source and those in a target domain. The set of correspondences between them are called conceptual metaphors. The role of metaphor in our ordinary conceptual system introduced by the two theorists has also been developed by Mark Turner (1989), Ray Gibbs (1994), Zoltán Kövecses

9

(2002), to mention but a few. The present paper resides on the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics and, precisely on conceptual metaphors as they are closely tied to the cultural period in which they activate. Thus, by analysing conceptual metaphors, we understand students' ability to re-adapt to learning and teachers' ability to re-structure their lectures and teaching methods to new realities. Innovation cannot be understood without concepts and imagery and, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) indicated, conventional metaphors define a particular socio-cultural context and are highlighted by metaphorical linguistic expressions. Such expressions prove not only the legitimacy of a given mapping between a source and a target domain but also the way in which new experiences are felt. Metaphorical expressions are the primary results of such mappings, and they reveal that, along with the technological improvement of online teaching, learners quickly adapt to the new environment, which is already familiar to them, i.e. the Internet, and which has been helping them to define who they are, the way they perceive and learn together with their hopes for the future.

Adopting the framework of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we intend to identify the conceptual mappings that arise from students' metaphorical representation regarding the digital transformations and educational changes during the pandemic. Thus, during online practical classes of English language, we investigated first-and second-year students from the Technical Faculties within "Vasile Alecsandri" University from Bacău. The students were asked to find a word which could best describe their experience of online teaching. The answers we have chosen for our analysis are mentioned in italics. Based on the respondents' personal experiences and cognition regarding these significant digital transformations, we could identify different perspectives starting from optimistic and leading to pessimistic and pessimistic-realistic ones, in accordance with each socio-cultural status generated by the coronavirus crisis in Romania during 2020 and 2021. For the purpose of this article we have chosen only the relevant data, in accordance with the educational experience. Some of the students' responses were descriptive while others were

short and concise as the following: *online education is a fortune/ an advantage* (because I can go to work and listen to the lectures at the same time) or *online education is different* (because I am not accustomed with it), *online teaching is sad* (because I miss my colleagues); *online education is a burden* (I spend too much time online/ I have too many assignments to complete), *online education is a challenge* (I learned how to use technology in order to attend classes online and now I am addicted to it). Not all the answers were rich from a linguistic point of view but they succeeded in transmiting their emotions together with a relationship between their own literal and metaphorical meanings, or the grounds responsible for the way metaphors work. Our examples of conceptual metaphors base on the most prominent answers (highlighted in italics) chosen from 40 respondents. Conceptual metaphors are essential to thought processes and can be found in the core of human cognition. They involve two concepts and have the form A is B, where concept A (the target domain) is understood in terms of concept B (the source domain).

3. The study

When it comes to online teaching, the first challenge for teachers is to succeed in creating a sense of presence in online teaching. Technology and education had to fraternize more closely than ever and thus, distance learners learned the proper meaning of being present despite physical boundaries. Computers and Internet are no longer associated with a waste of time, they became powerful instruments which allow their users *to turn a big enemy into a colossal friend* as some of our respondents highlighted. The distance has shortened and the addiction to electronic devices had to be controlled if not converted, through maturity and learning discipline, into self-control.

In this context, both students and teachers feel that the Internet became a way of teaching which found its place in the life of each user. As a source domain, the Internet represents the conceptual domain which organises and informs the unknown in terms of something more familiar. The Internet domain is available for anyone and can be used in

such a way so as to stand for a thing as a whole or just for a part of it exactly as metonymy succeeds in offering a variety of interpretative use of language and gives rise to semantic extension, lexical polisemy and semantic change. Consequently, the Internet becomes a basic concept because it seems to have become part of the education process. The Internet triggers education and, apart from being a powerful means for communication, THE INTERNET IS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL which makes it also a powerful instrument for innovation. This conceptual metaphor shows that The *Internet and Education equals contemporary education*. Our understanding of education comes from the structure of our knowledge about the Internet. THE INTERNET IS THE PROMOTER OF EDUCATION because it is *the fuel which makes it possible for education to progress; the internet is a powerful tool; I have never thought I will be able to sit in front of my PC and discuss with my classmates and my teachers; Internet is amazing*. These are reflections of systematic, metaphorical concepts that structure students' actions and thoughts and their educational experiences. Education is what differentiates individuals and now, by aligning to developed nations, the Internet becomes an integral element of education in Romania due to the crisis generated by COVID-19. The EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY ARE FRIENDS (*We couldn't have managed without the Internet*) metaphor entails an optimistic image in which THE CLASSROOM IS A VIRTUAL PLACE (*Internet is our scene and we are its actors, The teacher is on air*) where students are able to do everything from the intimacy of their own environments, happy to see their colleagues and teachers *on air/live*. The metaphor projects the image of an alternative to the real classroom where both students and teachers interact. Given the collaboration between both teachers and students which takes place within classroom activities, it is an important step for an effective learning process. The success of the educational act depends not only on pedagogical training but also on the methods and materials chosen. With the help of the Internet, both teachers and learners get involved as creators for an effective interaction. It is with the help of e-learning that students and teachers feel encouraged to cooperate in active learning. Without

students' skills, motivation, devotion and talent and without teachers' planning, implementation and assessment, the process of education cannot be improved. Technology and education become the means through which e-learning is possible and, at the same time, it also allows us to save time and work in virtual communities that are no longer limited to physical space. Nevertheless, the most important aspect is that we are able to avoid contacting the disease.

In another line of thought, EDUCATION IS UP AND RUNNING since all electronic devices together with the Internet 'oiled the wheels of a machine' whose travellers were the students (*Internet made it possible for us to continue our studies; Internet is a force; We have established the most important connection, the one with our education/ educators/classmates, a new connection with our culture; Education is back, Education continues*). When the things to which we want to refer are not very concrete and do not have a clear physical shape, we can understand them as entities or substances, or, as in our case, as containers. The conceptual metaphor, E-LEARNING IS A MACHINE, allows us to understand the extensions of a conventional metaphor. The machine metaphor (*Education is an electrical machine, Education is hybrid*) provides more structure to it as it leads us to thinking that e-learning has a productive capacity and both students and teachers represent its source of energy. Thus, many diverse linguistic expressions can be understood as surface manifestations of a basic conceptual mapping or metaphor. It is the transference from the proper to the figurative meaning that makes us project a physical image. Once we use metaphors, our utterances become parts of a much larger system of associations. The associations between education and machines show us the rapid changes that take place in the process of education and the speed to which information circulates through online communication.

Every little aspect brought by the pandemics subconsciously affected the way students perceive education. The psychological implications of lockdown made everybody feel trapped in a never-ending situation. Hence, optimism was not the only ingredient to prove to us that everything would turn out fine. Students' emotional status

changed from up to down and, in no time, they started feeling depressed. They felt the burden of their own work, of the multitude of assignments which had to be completed promptly and even the disadvantages brought by technology. Thus, the VIRTUAL CLASSROOM IS A TRAP/A PRISON metaphor connoted exhaustion, anxiety and depression. It is as if intimacy is invaded, the psycho-social implications of lockdown lead to monotony. Students are no longer enthusiastic about the new educational changes, they miss the traditional interaction in real classrooms and, as a result, they close their web cams in an attempt of *hiding behind the desk*. Students feel as if *they are stuck in a rut,* they feel depressed *they feel stuck behind my desk,* they *feel tired,* they give up easily and conclude that *online learning is not satisfying, online lerning will never replace face-to-face interaction.*

The crisis generated by the Covid-19 has directly affected students and they feel like coming back to their real life. EDUCATION IS DISTANCE/DISTANT, *the face-to-face connection has disappeared*, students spend too much time online and this is demanding. This conceptual metaphor projects the feelings of alienation and indifference which intensify the feelings of fear created by the social distance and the lockdown. Learners and instructors need to feel psychologically, emotionally and behaviourally present when they connect with each other in an authentic way during the online experience. The authenticity is given by perception, even if we do not see each other face to face, it does not mean that we cannot empathise or that we do not take into consideration the emotional aspects and the ways in which they influence participants' interactions online.

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM IS A DARK ROOM in which the teacher engages all his/ her effort in order to make students involved in the act of learning, but the student feels as if sacrificing their future and their time. The metaphor projects the image of sadness and disappointment. Students do not seem to care that distant teaching/ learning should be viewed only as a preventive action supposed to reduce the spread of the virus and, when the feelings of isolation dominate the participants, it leads to learners' dissatisfaction in the

14

online environment. The feeling of isolation is "due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the concept of presence. […] The inexperienced online instructor, needs to be aware of and understand the concept of presence in order to effectively adapt his lecture to this new environment and feel a connection with learners."[1] In addition, students are afraid of losing the connection with their colleagues and teachers because they live in rural areas with troubleshooting connection issues. Thus, THE ONLINE TEACHING/LEARNING IS HINDRANCE metaphor follows the process of isolation and highlights the image of disillusion, frustration and, above all, the fear of being unable to establish an Internet connection or the fear of a power failure which leads students into thinking that online learning may become inaccessible. Teachers may confront with the fear of losing 'face-to-face contact' with students in the online environment, because they do not even open their web cams. Students feel frustrated because of the burden of projects and repetitive schedules making them feel like robots, while teachers are perceived as *guides or as virtual assistants if not cyber teachers or just, devices.* Image schemas in various orientations and relations are selectively mapped onto the corresponding Internet domain, which make virtual reality comprehensible.

Exceeding the feeling of burden and isolation students have gradually reached to the conclusion that online learning is an alternative to traditional learning, that EDUCATION IS FLEXIBLE/ COMFORTABLE, that information is accessible and each answer is at a click away and, moreover, they *are able to keep pace with studies and work at the same time.* However, we have learned that the educational changes generated by the educational crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic can be easily compromised given the dominance of the traditional forms of real classroom education and that such changes need to be operated with precaution. The process of teaching and learning is the most

---

[1] Lehman, Rosemary M.; Conceição, Simone C.O., *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to be there for Distance Learners,* 1st Edition, PB Printing, United States of America, 2010, p. 2.

powerful instrument of education which can trigger the desired changes in the students.

Nowadays, the traditional perspective on teaching has changed, changing at the same time, the roles of both students and teachers as communicators and learners. Modern tools of information and technology have influenced the process of teaching even before the crisis, offering us the possibility to develop the process of education in a shorter period of time. Online teaching may not be as successful as it is in overdeveloped nations, but it will certainly continue to increase in Romania. Which leads us to thinking that ONLINE TEACHING IS PROGRESS since students have been offered the opportunity to continue their studies and make use of all the necessary ingredients for success. New reforms are imperative in times of crisis but they surely lead to evolution. Thus, from an educational perspective, technology has given us the opportunity to expand our knowledge and extend our reach to people and places we never considered before and thus, the benefits are far beyond imagination. Without education culture is not preserved and, in addition, the progress of education recreates human experience and promotes cultural value.

All in all, some students feel, that the process of education has never been more enjoyable and efficient than now. The progress of the online education triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic responded to the cultural needs of the students feeding their hungry minds and comforting their anxiety. The young generation, who was born in a world of technology, feels that online environment is their natural environment in which they are as right as rain.

Conclusions

Somehow, we have to thank Covid-19 for forcing us to keep up with the pace of modern life. Romania was not prepared for online teaching and it was imperative for education and educators to respond to technological advances in such harsh times. Journalists labelled education in many parts of Romania as *online school in an offline country* for the total lack of Internet connection and electronic devices. In the

16

information society, digital inclusion is essential especially for the power of communication and represents a democratic right. Nobody should be deprived of access to communication via a computer and the Internet especially when e-learning can encompass a wide variety of online initiatives and can offer many benefits that more traditional training options, such as facilitated sessions or lectures, don't provide. Digital technology does not only create online communities in which anyone can engage but it can also provide access to education which is a fundamental part of people's lives. Education plays a crucial role in transmitting the cultural heritage to the new generations. Nevertheless, cultural crisis arises when a society does not adapt to the changes brought by the interests of the community as a whole. It is only with the aid of education that individuals reconnect and cultural values preserve.

The conceptual metaphors identified in the present article prove that emotions get meanings and, we empathetically, project in our minds mental associations which respond to elements like anxiety, anger, frustration, tiredness, sadness, disappointment, doubt, despair, hope and even happiness, joy and excitement which seem to mix and project on a society puzzled by the consequences of a pandemic, in response to the measures taken, a society which passes from an extreme to another. The pandemic has affected and will continue to affect the delivery of information and knowledge as well as the educational skills. Through the digitalization of education, both students and teachers struggle to compensate the interruption of traditional educational patterns by learning to adapt to the new changes brought by the severe impact of COVID-19 on education.

Bibliography

Fauconnier, Gilles (1997): *Mappings in Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gere, Ch. (2002): *Digital Culture,* Reaktion Books Ltd., UK.

Gudea, Sorin (2008): *Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical Experiences,* Herhey, New York: Information Science Publishing.

Kövecses, Zoltán (2004): *Metaphor and Emotion, Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kövecses, Zoltán (2015): *Where Metaphors Come from: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lakoff, George; Johnson, Mark (1980): *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Lehman, Rosemary M.; Conceição, Simone C.O. (2010): *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to Be There for Distance Learners*, 1st Edition, United States of America: PB Printing.

Selwyn, Neil (2011): *Education and Technology. Key Issues and Debates*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

https://recorder.ro/scoala-online-in-tara-offline-daca-n-au-semnal-acasa-ies-doua-ulite-mai-incolo/(retrieved April 29, 2020), accessed April 29, 2021.

Gabriela Andrioai

affiliation: Faculty of Letters, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania
position : PhD Professor's Assistant
email: gabriela_andrioai@yahoo.com
research interests: general linguistics, semantics, ESP, lexicology, translation theory and practice

Selected publications:

(2020): "Promoting Urban Digital Culture through Metaphoric Representations" (Gabriela Andrioai), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, no. 25, Bacău: Alma Mater, pp. 11-20.

(2018): "Cultural identities Mirrored through English Idioms and Proverbs" (Gabriela Andrioai), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, no. 23, Bacău: Alma Mater, pp. 7-17.

(2018): "Teacher-Student Interaction in Language Acquisition" (Gabriela Andrioai), in *Interstudia*, no. 23, Bacău: Alma Mater, pp. 225-230.