

## Conceptual Metonymy in the Speech Act of Request

Marijana M. Prodanovic, University Singidunum, Serbia  
mprodanovic@singidunum.ac.rs

### Abstract

Based on the theoretical background from pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, this paper describes the role of conceptual metonymy in the two linguistic branches mentioned. Drawing on a corpus of written answers to a discourse scenario, the aim of the paper is to examine whether, and if yes — to what extent, conceptual metonymy forms the basis for the realisation of the speech act of request in the Serbian and English languages respectively. In order to answer the questions posed, the collected data have been analysed with the usage of a taxonomy of (in)directness, which linked the notions of metonymic nature — indirectness — politeness, and the final results have undoubtedly shown an overlap between pragmatics and cognitive linguistics in the process of speech acts' realisation, i.e. in the process of thinking and speaking.

### Key words

pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metonymy, speech act of request

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Thoughts & utterances

The relationship between what we think and what we utter is a complex one. The operations included in the process of the interpretation of language production are equally important for pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, and are thus the subject of research of both of these linguistic disciplines.

A human being, on the basis of acquired linguistic and general knowledge, can understand and/or produce lingual utterances. One of the basic cognitive linguistics principles is the principle of interrelationship between language and cognitive processes, such as: thinking, concluding, assuming and, finally, metonymic and metaphorical mapping. It can be said that language is governed by general cognitive processes, so that lingual realisations, actually reveal the way in which our conceptual system functions.

Cognitive linguistics neglects the *true* — *false* polarity and believes that conceptual experience forms the basis for human acquisition of new concepts; the mentioned experience is, above all, a corporeal one and the acquired knowledge is being structured in the so-called *Idealised Cognitive Models* — *ICM* (Lakoff, 1987). According to Langacker (1987), Taylor (1995) and other cognitive linguists, cognitive domain bears the characteristics of *encyclopaedic* domain,

which means that it encompasses all the knowledge the speaker possesses of a certain area of endeavour. For successful human communication, it is necessary that interlocutors share encyclopaedic domains of similar content, i.e. that their prior knowledge of conceptual world is similar enough, so that understanding of mutual communication is enabled.

At the same time, in the focus of pragmatics there is *implicature* (which inferential pragmatics, based on Grice's postulates, perceives as a group of maxims, principles or heuristics, which enable inference itself, but do not say much about its nature, however), which represents the conclusions about what has not been said in a specific utterance; implicature, at the same time, is conditioned not only by contextual, but by extra-linguistic knowledge as well, which, given the above-mentioned in mind, does form the beginning of the shared field of interest between pragmatics and cognitive linguistics.

Namely, *Relevance Theory* has given the conclusion that metonymy lies in the foundation of every conversational implicature and illocutionary force (Ruiz de Mendoza & Baicchi, 2007), though the metonymic activity had previously been neglected, for a long time (in the literature related to pragmatics), and considered as a mainly cognitive linguistics' phenomenon of a referential nature. Be that as it may, in order to reach the nature of reference, i.e. the process of implicature performance itself, metonymic operations cannot be avoided, since the understanding of metonymy is necessary for discourse cohesion.

Within the mentioned theoretical frame of the two linguistic disciplines, namely, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which the two disciplines, via conceptual metonymy, overlap and the way in which this overlapping, i.e. interaction, leaves traces in discourse, namely, the speech act of request in the English and Serbian language.

Starting from the assumption that metonymy forms the basis for all indirect speech acts, the main goal of this paper is to, using the current pragmatic taxonomy of (in)direct strategies, show the extent in which the speech act of request is expressed in an indirect way in the Serbian and English languages respectively and, at the same time, how often metonymic relations are used by the interlocutors, with the aim of achieving successful communication flow.

## **1.2 Conceptual metonymy**

Since ancient times, the phenomenon of metonymy has been well known, firstly in rhetoric and literature within which, as a major trope (later a figure of speech), performed the function of *a change of name*, which, actually, is the very meaning of the term itself. Much time later, metonymy, along with metaphor, has become the leading tool for the mapping of relations in cognitive linguistics,

where its function has remained, almost, the same as it used to be once, during ancient times; it, namely, even within the borders of cognitive linguistics, serves as a tool for the relations of changing one term (name) for another.

There is a generally accepted opinion in cognitive linguistics that metonymy represents the mapping within the same experiential domain or conceptual structure (Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2000; Taylor, 1995). Nevertheless, metonymic mappings do not appear randomly, they are, on the contrary, systematically arranged, in the form of conceptual metonymies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980); to be more precise, a logical relationship between the notions/concepts is a necessary one.

Namely, cognitive linguistics perceives language pursuant to a postulate, according to which the pieces of information are formed as structured areas or concepts, where real-life scenes are being elaborated in a way preconditioned by language background, i.e. the language conventions typical for a specific language community. This is also, in consent with the mentioned notion of Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), introduced by Lakoff (1987), who used this new term, for what Fillmore had previously named *frames*. Metaphor and metonymy are capable, by focusing on a specific part of a concept, within an ICM, to transfer/map some information using the language content, which can be named, according to traditional nomenclature, figurative.

It is typical for each metonymic mapping that there are *target* (T) and *source* (S) domains, which are parts of the same conceptual domain, so that different kinds of mapping are possible within such an organisation of concepts: whole for part, part for whole, etc.

### 1.3 Speech acts (and their place in cognitive linguistics)

One of the most important pragmatic concepts is *Speech Act Theory*. Names to be mentioned here are, in the first place, Austin and Searle, the former of whom identified the utterances which he called *performatives*, by which we, at the same time, do/perform what we say (1962). The mentioned author suggested a three-part frame of classification: *Locution* — the words the speaker utters, i.e. literal meaning of the utterance; *Illocution* — the force of the utterance, i.e. what the speaker wants the utterance to make; *Perlocution* — the effect the utterance produces on the hearer. For Austin, the most important part of the frame is illocution, since it bears the illocutionary force, which is, in some number of cases, explicit.

In terms of illocution, it is important to mention the division of speech acts into *direct* and *indirect* ones. Direct speech acts can be defined as those utterances in which there is conformity between communicative function on one

side, and the type of sentence, performative verb or other indicator of the function on the other side. Indirect speech acts, on the other hand, are those utterances in which there is no conformity between the intended communicative function and sentence type, performative verb or other illocutionary indicator.

So, for example, the utterance: *Can you bring me some water?* is in the form of a question, but, actually, bears the illocutionary force of the speech act of request, regardless of its interrogative form, which is unlike the following: *I request a glass of water from you.* Moreover, an utterance is not necessarily in the form of a sentence, in order for it to transmit the illocutionary force, e.g.: *If you would be so kind to come...* (addressed to a waiter in a restaurant), instead of: *I request that you come here.*

Since cognitive approach relies on the *Prototype Theory* (Rosch, 1978), where, within the same category, there are members whose interrelation is not equal (some of them are better representatives of a certain category), the inner structure of speech acts can also be seen as a prototypical category, where each illocutionary type can be prototypically evaluated. Marmaridou (2000) gave an interesting suggestion regarding this kind of evaluation of speech acts, namely, she proposed that speech acts should form their own ICM, within which there would be prototypical and peripheral representatives. In the case of speech acts, prototypical representatives could be performative verbs, such as: *order, demand, beg, proclaim...*, whereas peripheral representatives would be indirect speech acts.

#### **1.4 Speech act of request — from pragmatic theory to practice**

Speech actions, which, within their intention, bear somewhat altered behaviour of the addresser, Searle named *directive speech acts* (Searle, 1969). There are a few types of directives: requests, apologies, threats, pieces of advice, offers, etc., and all of them have the illocutionary force of different strength. The speech act of request has a strong illocutionary force, somewhere between an order, on one side, and a plea, on the other side.

The phenomenon of *face* plays an important role in the realisation of the speech act of request. Namely, all human beings, in all the cultures of the world, do possess the quality termed face, i.e. the positive identity of themselves (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Decades ago, Brown and Levinson saw the notions of face and *politeness* (as the realisation of respect towards someone's face) as important, if not the most important, factors for controlling the way people communicate. With regards to face, the two authors noticed two aspects of human emotions related to face and these are *negative and positive face*; the former is the wish of an individual not to be imposed by others and the latter is

the wish of an individual to be praised and respected by others. Complementary to the two dimensions of face, pragmatic theorists have introduced two dimensions of politeness as well — *positive and negative politeness*.

Brown and Levinson also established three factors that define the realisation of face among interlocutors: *Power* (vertical distance between the interlocutors), *Distance* (horizontal distance between the interlocutors) and the *Rate of imposition* discussed about. It is important to pinpoint that these factors played an important role in the production of the questionnaire for the purposes of this paper as well.

It is well known that there are speech actions, and, among them, speech acts, which, in social interaction, have a stronger potential to threaten someone's face than the others; these speech acts are *face-threatening acts* and include, but are not limited to, the following: apologies, critics, requests, orders, suggestions.

The speech act of request has been widely examined in cross-cultural research of pragmatics, mainly through the eyes of politeness. Though Brown and Levinson advocated the universal character of politeness, which, in one way or another, has been proved to be part of each world's culture and customs, the way and rate according to which the speakers of world languages minimise threats of face-threatening speech acts, nonetheless, vary from language to language.

Brown and Levinson's research (1978, 1987) found that politeness phenomenon occurred in three unrelated languages: English, Mayan, and Tamil (a South Indian language). The research has shown that humans in every culture share a very broad set of polite linguistic conventions for mitigating the force of speech acts and that these linguistic mechanisms serve the same interactional and social purpose.

Then, House and Kasper (1981) studied the relative politeness of utterances in German and English. They measured politeness by having native English and German speakers role-play two types of delicate international situations — complaints and requests. Eventually — they concluded that compared to British speakers, German speakers were significantly less polite in the situations and tended to use more aggressive constructions.

Blum-Kulka and House (1989) compared native speakers of Hebrew, Canadian French, Argentinean Spanish, Australian English, and German, finding distinctive cross-cultural differences. Argentinean Spanish speakers were the most direct, followed by the speakers of Hebrew. Australian English were the least direct speakers. Of intermediate levels of directness were French Canadians and Germans.

The CCSARP is perhaps the most extensive empirical investigation of cross-cultural pragmatics. CCSARP stands for the *Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization*

*Project.* It was set to investigate cross-cultural and inter-lingual variations in the speech acts of requests and apologies. This study involved seven languages, including English, French, Danish and Hebrew (Blum-Kulka, 1982).

Shoshana Blum-Kulka (1987) spoke about the relationship between indirectness and politeness. She introduced the terms of conventional and nonconventional indirectness and added that the term of politeness should be related to the former but not necessarily to the latter form of indirectness she proposed. Two years later (1989), Shoshana Blum-Kulka did a major cross-cultural research with requests and apologies as the subject of the research. For the purposes of that research, a taxonomy was made — which would later become one of the most used taxonomies for similar pragmatic studies (and will be defined below).

Differences in requesting strategies in English and Polish were studied by Wierzbicka (1985). This study was based on the assumption that differences between these two languages in requesting strategies appeared due to differences in cultural norms existing between the two communities: English requesting strategies depend heavily on the usage of interrogative, and avoid the usage of bare imperatives to a great extent. Polish, on the other hand, would rarely use interrogatives to convey requests; interrogatives in Polish are largely associated with hostility and alienation.

## **2 Data and Methods of Research**

### **2.1 Data**

In the research, conducted for the purposes of this paper, academics from universities in Serbia and Great Britain participated. There were 60 of them, 30 per language, both included males and females; all the participants were informed that the data would remain anonymous and they all voluntarily accepted to be part of the research. In gathering the data, a *Discourse Completion Test* (DCT) was used. Adapted in 1982 by Blum-Kulka, for the purpose of investigating speech acts, the DCT is a questionnaire containing a set of briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act. Subjects read each situation and respond to a prompt in writing.

In this paper, DCT is composed of one speech action, i.e. scenario. The examinees answered to a scenario, which described the interlocutors who knew each other and whose social status was equal. When composing the test, the rate of imposition did not play a major role as did the factors of power and distance, but it is worth mentioning that the rate was not at a significant level, i.e. that the potential threat for the hearer's face was as much minimised as possible. The

examinees gave their answers in written form and the goal of the DCT was to elicit the speech act of request.

The scenario from the DCT was as follows:

*Your friend is going shopping to a shopping centre, rather far from your home, but you cannot join him. So, you want to ask him to do you a favour and do some shopping for you, too. YOU SAY: ...*

## 2.2 Data Analysis

The data collected through the Discourse Completion Test was analysed. This analysis was based on an independent examination of each response. The different situations may elicit 9 different request strategies listed in order of directness, with the first one being the most direct and the ninth one being the most indirect, as follows:

- Mood derivable
- Explicit performative
- Hedged performative
- Obligation statement (Locution derivable)
- Want statement (Scope stating)
- Suggestory formulae
- Query preparatory (Preparatory condition)
- Strong hints
- Mild hints (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

## 3 Results of the analysis and discussion

Prior to presenting the results of the analysis, we shall provide an example, per each of the possible nine strategies for the realisation of the speech act of request, for easier data decoding:

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1) Mood derivable        | <i>Go and buy some apples for me!</i>  |
| 2) Explicit performative | <i>I order you to move!</i>  |
| 3) Hedged performative   | <i>I have to ask you to sit down.</i>  |
| 4) Obligation statement  | <i>Sir, you will have to move your car.</i>  |
| 5) Want statement        | <i>I really do want you to stop singing.</i>                                       |
| 6) Suggestory formulae   | <i>What about cleaning our room today?</i>   |
| 7) Query preparatory     | <i>Can you buy a pair of shoes for me, too?</i>                                    |
| 8) Strong hint           | <i>You have left the kitchen in a real mess.</i>                                   |
| 9) Mild hint             | <i>"I am allergic to sun." (says a girl to a friend who insists on sunbathing)</i> |

The results of the analysis have shown that the dominant strategy, among the answers we have collected, in both the languages, is *Query Preparatory*. This

strategy is characterised as a question, which should be understood as a request, by the hearer (mostly in the form of *Can I/Can you; Could I/Could you...*).

More than 90% of requests, in both the groups of examinees, expressed through the usage of the Query Preparatory strategy, were in the form of e.g. *Can you buy me...* In this form of question, we can clearly see that the request itself is oriented towards the hearer (*Can YOU buy ME...*), as opposed to the rest of the answers/requests from the data (only few of them), where the question was posed in the form of e.g. *Can I ask you...*, i.e. where it was oriented towards the speaker (*Can I ask YOU...*), which is a more polite way of addressing.

As it has been proved in previous research, there is a very productive metonymic mapping in the English language, when it comes to the usage of indirect requests; that is the so-called *potentiality for actuality* (Panther & Thornburg, 2003) mapping, the most obvious in a standard polite request: *Can you pass me the water?*

In this case the potentiality itself (i.e. the ability of the speaker to perform a part of a scenario) has been put in the role of the real request fulfilment; it, namely metonymically, represents the part of the concept, which is in the middle of the speaker's attention.

The same applies to the Serbian language, according to the results of the analysis of the data gathered for the purposes of this paper. Query Preparatory itself, actually, bears this type of metonymic mapping; namely, the metonymic relationship of this kind forms the basis for understanding of a speech act of this kind.

Regardless, we have to mention that the minority of answers, which were not in the form of Query Preparatory, were expressed through the strategy of *Mood Derivable*, with the usage of imperative, e.g. *Buy me...* In examples like these, the illocutionary force of speech acts is explicit — it is quite clear what the speaker wants from the hearer. According to the above-mentioned opinion of Marmaridou (2000), a speech act realised in this way is not a prototypical one, since it does not consist of a performative verb (to be more precise, only the strategies of *Hedged Performative* and *Explicit Performative* can be considered as prototypical ones; however, those were not found in the data analysed), but is, then again, far more peripheral than the dominant one of Query Preparatory.

Finally, the data analysis revealed the usage of one more strategy, which is the strategy of *Strong Hint*, in both languages were very rarely used (5 occurrences in Serbian and only 2 in English). In respect of this strategy, we found the patterns like: *I also need some supplies...* In this way, the speaker gives a hint to the hearer that he wants the hearer to do something for him. This strategy is actually the most distant from the illocutionary centre, thus its illocutionary

force is the least transparent, but, with the implementation of conceptual metonymy, the hearer can properly define the message sent by the speaker.

With regards to the above-mentioned notions, Panther and Thornburg (2003) introduced the *Action Scenario*, composed of three phases: *before*, *immediate result*, *after*. Each of the phases relating to the action (activity) bears a metonymic relationship with the whole, so that each phase alone, can stand for the whole scenario. In an utterance such as: *I can lend you some money, I have got plenty of it*, the possibility itself, in this case expressed by the verb *can*, stands for the speech act of offer (the *before* phase stands for the whole action scenario, i.e. speech act).

The Action Scenario can be applied to all speech acts. We can also find it in the answers we have collected and analysed. The examples which appeared in the form of *Can you/Can I...* (Query Preparatory) do not only represent the metonymic relationship *potentiality for actuality (realisation)*, but at the same time, they can be perceived as the *before* phase of the action scenario, which here, stands for the whole speech act of request. Analogically observed, the strategy of Strong Hint, which, nevertheless, did not prove to be productive in the data we analysed, does function as a part of the action scenario, e.g. the utterances like: *I also need some things from the supermarket...* can be seen as the *after* phase of the action scenario, which, again, stands for the speech act of request. At the same time, this strategy can be explained as a metonymic relationship *necessity for realisation*, where the verb *need* emphasises the need to perform the action that follows. For the examples using the strategy Mood Derivable, where the illocutionary force of the speech act is explicitly realised, though without the usage of a performative verb, we can see that they do represent the *immediate result* phase, which stands for the whole act.

#### 4 Conclusion

The results of the analysis of the gathered data have shown that speakers of Serbian and English, in the realisation of the speech act or request, opt for conventional indirectness, in the vast majority of cases. Metonymic relationships form part of this kind of addressing, which would otherwise be impossible to understand. Namely, conceptual metonymy serves as the basis of scenarios, in the background of some indirect speech acts — here in the realisation of the speech act of request, and thus enables a faster interchange of information in the process of communication.

Since the majority of the answers provided were expressed in the form of Query Preparatory strategy, where the metonymic mapping *potentiality for actuality*, was applied, it can be said that this kind of mapping, on the sample of

English and Serbian, has proved to be a typologically universal and very productive. As we could also see throughout the analysis and discussion, other, less-used strategies, bore metonymic mapping, within themselves, as well.

From the abovementioned, we can see that the examinees have shown a high level of indirectness, in direct contact with the usage of metonymy, and a certain level of distance towards the hearer/interlocutor, regardless of the explanation, in the DCT itself, that the interlocutors are familiar with each other and that their social status is equal.

The metonymic effect used is a characteristic of many pragmatically framed semantic contents, and thus can be seen in the situations where it is necessary to introduce the so-called *politeness effect*. At the same time, it is typical that the distance of the peripheral element, within the concept, which is being metonymically mapped onto the target message (to be transmitted), is equivalent to the distance in the social surrounding, what makes the *face-saving* mechanism. It is sure that relations like these (conceptual metonymy — indirectness — politeness) are culturally and socially conditioned, and that the situation is not the same in all languages.

Then again, the subjects in this research, the speakers of English and Serbian, probably in a subconscious way, have shown that they, in the first place, share very similar patterns of addressing, when it comes to the speech act of request, and that they do pay attention to the notion face of their interlocutors, which leads us to the fact that we can perceive their communication as polite, and thus it becomes clear that a merely cognitive linguistics tool has been used for accomplishing indirectness and politeness, which are merely pragmatic phenomena. At this place we can conclude that pragmatics, basically, *copies* and applies the approach of cognitive linguistics, while, by choosing certain parts of a scenario, i.e. indirect speech act, transferring the key part of the information (indirectly), neglecting, at the same time, the principle of literality, as a possible basis of human interaction.

## References

- AUSTIN, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BLUM-KULKA, S., & OLSHTAIN, E. (1984). Requests and Apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP), *Applied Linguistics*, 5 (3), 196-213.
- BLUM-KULKA, S., HOUSE J., & KASPER, G. (1989). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- BROWN, P., & LEVINSON, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- GEERAERTS, D., & CUYCKENS, H. (2007). *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HOUSE, J., & KASPER, G. (1981). Politeness markers in English and German. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational Routine* (pp. 157-185). The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- LAKOFF, G. (1987). *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- LAKOFF, G., & JOHNSON, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- LAKOFF, G., & TURNER, M. (1989). *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LANGACKER, R. W. (1987). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- LEECH, G. (1983). *The Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- MARMARIDOU, S. A. (2000). *Pragmatic Meaning and Cognition*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- PANTHER, K.-U., & RADDEN, G. (Eds.). (1999). *Metonymy in Language and Thought*. Amsterdam: JBP.
- PANTHER, K.-U., & THORNBURG, L. (Eds.). (2003). *Metonymy and Pragmatic Inferencing*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- PANTHER, K.-U., & THORNBURG, L. (2004). The role of conceptual metonymy in meaning construction. *Metaphoric.de*, 6. Retrieved from: <http://www.metaphoric.de/06/pantherthornburg.htm>
- RASULIĆ, K. (2010). Aspekti metonimije u jeziku i mišljenju. *Theoria*, 53(3), 49-70.
- ROSCH, E. (1978). Principles of categorization. In E. Rosch, & B. B. Lloyd (Eds.), *Cognition and Categorization* (pp. 27-48). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- RUIZ DE MENDOZA, F. J. (2000). The role of mappings and domains in understanding metonymy. In A. Barcelona (Ed.), *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads* (pp. 109-132). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- RUIZ DE MENDOZA, F. J., & BAICCHI, A. (2007). Illocutionary Constructions: Cognitive motivation and linguistic realization. In I. Kecskes & L. Horn (Eds.), *Explorations in Pragmatics: Linguistic, Cognitive, and Intercultural Aspects* (pp. 95-128). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- SEARLE, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SEARLE, J. R. (1975). Indirect Speech Acts. In P. Cole, & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 59-92). New York: Academic Press.
- TAYLOR, J. R. (1989). *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- THORNBURG, L., & PANTHER, K.-U. (1997). Speech act metonymies. In W.-A. Liebert, G. Redeker, & L. Waugh (Eds.), *Discourse and Perspectives in Cognitive Linguistics* (pp. 205-219). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- WIERZBICKA, A. (1985). Different Cultures, Different Languages, Different Speech Acts. Polish vs. English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9(2-3), 145-178.



**Contact**

Marijana M. Prodanovic, MA,  
University Singidunum, 32 Danijelova Street,  
Belgrade, Serbia,  
mprodanovic@singidunum.ac.rs  
prodanovic316@hotmail.com