

## Teaching metaphorical color expressions in Modern Greek

Katerina Alexandri  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)

**Abstract** The purpose of this paper is to study the metaphorical expressions which contain words that indicate color (nouns and adjectives), e.g. *Έγινε κόκκινος από τη ντροπή* ‘He blushed from embarrassment’. Although these expressions belong to the basic vocabulary of languages, only minimum important research has been done in this direction for the Modern Greek language.

In particular, this paper examines the factors that have to be taken into account in order to understand the metaphorical interpretation of these expressions and suggest ways of teaching them within the framework of teaching Modern Greek as a Foreign Language. The research is focused on students of the School of Modern Greek (level B2, adults), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), whilst the methodology is mainly based on the cognitive approach.

**Keywords:** Metaphor • Color expressions • Cognitive linguistics • Teaching Modern Greek as a Second/Foreign Language.

### 1 Introduction

This study concerns the teaching of metaphors that include a color term and it has been drawn for adult students of the School of Modern Greek (AUTH), level B2 (efficiency level). Firstly, we make an attempt to define the meaning of metaphor and to describe its nature, structure and attributes. Afterwards, we make a distinction between figurative and non figurative (literal) language and we mention some examples from Modern Greek (MG). Finally, we propose a teaching method and some indicative structural and communicational formulae of exercises.

### 2 The theoretical frame

The metaphor should more often be included in the program of teaching a foreign language for three reasons. Firstly, it has a central role referring to the language use. Moreover, people speak figuratively because they cannot express themselves differently. This is the reason why the figurative language is primary in a number of communicational circumstances (Gibbs 1998). Χριστίδης (2001) mentions the *archetype* of the metaphor, that is due to the fact that this process is mainly mobilized by some *archetypical* components of a symbolic labeling—*deixis*. Secondly, from a structural view, the metaphor is presented in many sectors of the

linguistic system. And thirdly, we can rely on a great deal of research on metaphor in order to make this proposal feasible.

In their book on metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson (1985) define the metaphor as a “process that allows us to comprehend one thing via another one”. Lakoff (1993), in the frame of the cognitive approach, defines it as the “comprehension of an experiential/conceptual region [...] in the terms of a very different experiential/conceptual region”. On the contrary, a notion is literal when for its comprehension no use of linguistic material from another linguistic region is required.

According to Χριστίδης (1999), in order to face the problem of sentential rationality created by the metaphor, the usual handling was to reduce the metaphor to the comparison—to reduce the paradoxical metaphorical *είναι* ‘it is’ to the comparison *είναι σαν* ‘it is like’ that respects the categorical and semantic delimitations and does not force the rationality rules. In this way, the problem of metaphors is transferred from the language structure to the language use. According to Davidson (1978), the metaphor does not concern the *conventional* sentential meaning, but the production and comprehension of the sentence.

In the example (1), the sentence appears paradoxical in a first reading: on a non-figurative level it is not possible for *λευκά είδη* ‘linens’ to be *πολύχρωμα* ‘multicolored’! Therefore, the aim is to find the strategies by which the speaker means and the listener comprehends something different from what the sentence means.

- (1) *Λευκά είδη με άποψη και στιλ! Τώρα και σε νέα χρώματα!*  
‘Original and stylish linens! Now available in new colors!’

The present research is based on the cognitive approach (Lakoff 1990, 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1985), which focuses on three basic aspects of the metaphor: the nature, the structure and its attributes.

(a) As for its nature, the metaphor is in the first place conceptual and incidentally linguistic. The human conceptual system is mainly figurative and the figurative language expressions constitute the realization of abstract conceptual metaphors. Moreover, the metaphor is not simply a linguistic phenomenon, but also constitutes the human reality and is a means of comprehension of the human experience (Σγουρούδη 2003).

(b) As for its structure, the metaphor is the interrelation of two regions. A movement of attributes from the base region to the target region is observed. The interrelations are one-way, partially catholic or culturally specialized and in no case arbitrary, provided that they abut in the somaticity and the daily friction of persons with persons and facts.

(c) As for its attributes, the metaphor constitutes a reflection of thought. Consequently, not only the appearance but also its use is characterized as automatic, continuous and subconscious.

It is not always easy to put the limits between figurative and not figurative (“literal”) language and the chromatic terms often do not only refer to color but also suggest other meanings (Steinvall 2002). The opinion of Χριστίδης (2001) is also unifying; he considers that the difference between metaphors and *strict sense* is found simply in that in the *strict sense* the *deictic heat* is inconspicuous, *hypnotized*, but is not absent because otherwise its metaphorical *awakening* would not be possible. The analysis proposed by Αναστασιάδη-Συμεωνίδη (2006) also unifies the literal and the metaphorical meaning, as each interpretation represents a seat of a regular polyedron or rather an area on the surface of a ball, and mentions the extentional (e.g. *άσπρη μπλούζα* ‘white t-shirt’) and intentional interpretation (e.g. *άσπρη μέρα* ‘white day’).

With regard to the chromatic expressions, we consider as metaphorical color expressions those whose conceptual region, in which the color term is reported, belongs to a chromatic region, as in the example (2):

- (2) a. *Ήμουν ένα **μαύρο πρόβατο** στο κοπάδι. Ήταν ζήτημα χρόνου να με απολύσουν.*  
 ‘I was a **black sheep** in the flock. It was a matter of time before I got fired.’
- b. *Ο Αιγύπτιος Μπούτρος Γκάλι υπήρξε το κόκκινο πανί και ταυτόχρονα το **μαύρο πρόβατο** για τον Μπιλ Κλίντον και την Μαντλίν Ολμπράιτ.*  
 ‘The Egyptian Boutros Ghali was the red cape and at the same time the **black sheep** for Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright.’
- c. *Αν απορρίψουμε το Σχέδιο Ανάν, θα είμαστε το **μαύρο πρόβατο** στην Ευρώπη.*  
 ‘If we reject the Annan Plan, we will be the **black sheep** of Europe.’
- d. *Πρέπει να απαλλαγεί από το σύνδρομο της αντιπολίτευσης και να μην βλέπει ως **μαύρο πρόβατο** όποιον εκφράζει μια άποψη.*  
 ‘He should be released from the opposition syndrome, so that he does not consider whoever expresses an opinion a **black sheep**.’
- e. *Θα σταματήσουμε επιτέλους να θεωρούμαστε παντού ως το **μαύρο πρόβατο** της Ευρώπης.*  
 ‘At last, we will stop being considered everywhere as the **black sheep** of Europe.’

In the examples (2a–e), which were taken from the Corpus of Greek Texts (CGT)<sup>1</sup>, we can see that the use of *μαύρο* ‘black’ is not just naming the color. The ‘black sheep’ is a complex construction. On one hand, there are black sheep that we usually meet less often than the white. On the other, the meaning of this expression does not result from any behavior of these black sheep: apart from their color, there is nothing particular about them. On the contrary, the

<sup>1</sup> For more information on CGT: Γούτσος, 2003.

metaphorical meaning that exists in the word ‘black’ has the significance of “bad”, a significance which we can find in many other phrases that include ‘black’ implicating the “different”. According to the definition given in the *Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας* (Dictionary of the Modern Greek Language) of Μπαμπινιώτης (2002), by using this phrase we characterize ‘a person that differs from the others because of a characteristic (usually negative) or a person that causes with his attitude the reaction of the rest’. At the interpretation of this metaphor, the student should discover the point which abuts the resemblance between ‘black’ and ‘bad’ and, thus activate the cognitive form: WHITE IS GOOD–BLACK IS BAD.

Thus, expressions such as *μαύρη αγορά* ‘black market’, *μαύρη λίστα* ‘black list’ etc. have been transformed to stereotyped expressions and in these expressions the term ‘black’ implicates different connotations, such as “bad”, “secret”, “illegal”, “unlucky”, “dark/ melancholic”, losing the meaning of “color”. Consequently, these expressions are considered mainly as conceptual and secondly as linguistic, while their meaning is not arbitrary or accidental but motivated by the preexisting organization of the significance.<sup>2</sup>

Certain color terms, the basic color terms, are often used, not in order to describe an entity, but to categorize it. The attribute used for this aim should be at the same time salient and general. And this can explain the preference of some color terms. Within this process the term for the salient color is used as a vehicle to access a category.

In the example (3), it appears that the metaphorical use of color terms matches with this description. It is taxonomic and, thus related with the form and not the token and the result is a generalization and not a precision.

- (3) *Τα πέντε παιδιά, με το μπόλικο ταλέντο και την παθιασμένη αγάπη για τη μαύρη μουσική του παρελθόντος, δεν μπόρεσαν να αντέξουν τέτοιες εντάσεις.*  
‘The five children, with the great talent and the passionate love for the old **black music**, could not bear such intensities.’

It is a type of music and not simply any music that is executed by certain racial and social teams (a white artist can play black music, as well). The general question about black and white, with regard to race, is very thin. The close relation between social, political, economic, cultural and racial questions creates a situation in which white and black have absorbed a lot of determinations that can be important in a concrete context.

Often enough, it appears that the use of metaphorical expressions is to categorize a subclass. The examples: *κίτρινος τύπος* ‘yellow press’, *ροζ ταινία* ‘pink film’, *μαύρη μαγεία* ‘black magic’, etc. refer to subclasses: a type of

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information: Ανδρέου & Γαλαντόμος (2006).

journalism, a kind of film, a type of magic etc. These color terms refer to abstract meanings and not to concrete colors.<sup>3</sup>

The most frequent color terms that we meet in metaphorical expressions of Modern Greek are the following:

[-sapient]	[+sapient]
άσπρος 'white'	λευκός 'white'
μαύρος 'black'	μέλας 'black'
κόκκινος 'red'	ερυθρός 'red'
γκρίζος 'grey'	φαιός 'grey'
κίτρινος 'yellow'	
πράσινος 'green'	
γαλάζιος 'light blue'	
μπλουμαρέν 'navy blue'	
ροζ 'pink', ρόδινος 'rosy'	
χρυσός 'gold'	

Table 1. The most frequent color terms in metaphorical expressions of MG

Moreover, very few color terms have a metaphorical meaning and those who have it, either appear to present it in a concrete nominal region or rather receive the metaphorical meaning from the original object and not from the produced color (Steinvall 2002), as in the case of the adjective *ρόδινος* 'rosy' (*Τα βλέπει όλα ρόδινα* 'Everything seems rosy to him').

On a cross-language level, the metaphorical use of color terms reveals not only the existence of a different view of the world but also the existence of different tendencies, e.g. the significance "immoral, pornographic", is expressed by the use of different color terms in various languages: e.g. 'blue' in English, 'green' in French and Spanish, 'yellow' in Chinese (Mandarin) and 'pink' in Modern Greek (Ting-Fang Wu, 2007). Moreover, we should also take into consideration the different psychology connected to the geographic environment and the climatic conditions. We could possibly speak about a national character of the color expressions.

However, from a universal point of view, Chen (1995)<sup>4</sup> says that the forms that are based on the perception and the prototypical chromatic terms present a low degree of abstraction (being more transparent), while the types that are based on the senses, the signals and the symbols, the argot and idioms present a high degree of abstraction (being less transparent).

Finally, the diachronic study of a word may clarify its metaphorical meaning, e.g. in Ancient Greek, *μαῦρος* (ἀμαυρός) meant "dark", "vague", "forgotten".

<sup>3</sup> Βελοῦδης (2005) maintains that the color terms call in question the categorical limits.

<sup>4</sup> In Ting-Fang Wu (2007).

### 3 The teaching approach

Our objective is to strengthen the students' communication efficiency and more specifically to strengthen their metaphorical ability with regard to the metaphorical color expressions. The student is at the center of the educational process (level of efficiency, B2) and the tools and methods used are developed based on his needs, and the trials in which the students are submitted are drawn on them, so that we may realize the degree of achievement of our initial objectives.

For the teaching of metaphors, we propose the cognitive approach because according to the research of Kövecses and Szabó (1996) and Ανδρέου and Γαλαντόμος (2006), it facilitates the learning of idioms from the non-native speakers of a language, as it offers solutions for the justification of their existence and their conceptual categorization. Following the conclusions of the cognitive linguistics (and the proposal of Γαλαντόμος 2008) we structure the teaching program in two parts: (a) universal metaphors, which concern typologically independent languages, and (b) cultural metaphors, which result from the interaction of a person with their social environment.

The metaphors used in the present teaching approach are chosen according to the following criteria:

(a) The frequency of appearance of the metaphors in everyday language with which the students of Modern Greek as a Second/Foreign language are in contact: they are taught first as they are the more useful, the knowledge and use of which will contribute to a smoother integration of the foreign students into Greek society.

(b) The transparency of their sense (they were graded according to levels of difficulty): the teaching of figurative expressions that present higher semantic transparency precedes because of its low degree of difficulty for memorization.

(c) The resemblances in the metaphors between two or more languages (cross-language approach of metaphors): because of various difficulties in their corresponding they are not taught in the beginning, despite the fact that when there is semantic equivalence and formal correspondence between the figurative expressions of the two languages, the cross-language effect may function positively.

(d) The students' needs and interests: Γαλαντόμος (2008) proposes teaching only the idioms that the students wish to learn.

The realization of a program with a communicative orientation means that it will include not only structural activities that will inform the student of the internal structure of figurative expressions (and idioms), but also communicative ones that will guide them on the advisable environments of use.

**Structural exercises** can have different forms, e.g. recognition of expressions, description of their meaning and use with the help of dictionaries, filling gaps, localization of errors, exercises of corresponding or multiple choice,

use of pictures or their translation into the students' maternal language (Αναστασιάδη-Συμεωνίδη & Ευθυμίου 2006).

**Communicative exercises** can be the search for a title for the text, the search for metaphorical expressions in the Press, television or internet, the dramatization of these expressions etc. They are activities based on authentic material that the students face in their everyday life and which provide them with motives for the achievement of concrete goals, individually and/or in groups.

We should not neglect the **role of pictures** in the exercises that we propose, as particular importance is attributed to the multimodality (the combination of the linguistic and optical code), even more when it comes to colors. We propose using questions that would call the students to imagine a possible illustration of the expressions that are taught and to explain why they would choose it. However, we do not believe that we can rely solely on the role of the picture for the comprehension of metaphors, while relative experiments (Cacciari and Glucksberg 1995) have proved that the virtual attribution of figurative expressions reflects more the literal than the figurative meaning, specifically when it presents a high degree of opacity and abstraction.

These are some indicative structural and communicational formulae of exercises:

1. Read the following sentences, underline the words and/or phrases that you believe that are used metaphorically and, with the help of a dictionary, write their literal meaning.
2. Fill in the gaps with the suitable form.
3. Underline the correct expression in each one of the following sentences.
4. Match the metaphorical words or expressions with their meanings.
5. Join the phrases of the left column with the suitable phrases from the right column, so that they make sense.
6. Translate the following metaphorical expressions into your mother tongue.
7. What do these words implicate? Paint something relative to their meaning or attach a relative picture to each one.
8. Search for metaphorical color expressions in the Press or TV programs and dramatize them (in pairs or groups) in class.
9. Read the following text and find an adequate title, which contains a metaphorical color expression.
10. Show on the map the following toponyms and search for information (on the web) about the origin of their name.

### References

Αναστασιάδη-Συμεωνίδη, Α. 2006. Πρόταση για τη διδασκαλία της μεταφοράς. *Μελέτες για την Ελληνική Γλώσσα* 26.45–56.

- Αναστασιάδη-Συμεωνίδη, Α. & Α. Ευθυμίου. 2006. *Οι Στερεότυπες Εκφράσεις και η Διδακτική της Νέας Ελληνικής ως Δεύτερης Γλώσσας*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Πατάκη.
- Ανδρέου, Γ. & Ι. Γαλαντόμος. 2006. Πρόταση διδασκαλίας των μεταφορών και των ιδιωτισμών της νέας ελληνικής ως ξένης γλώσσας. *Investigationes Linguisticae, Vol. XIII*. Poznan.
- Βελούδης, Γ. 2005. *Η σημασία πριν, κατά και μετά τη γλώσσα*. Αθήνα: Κριτική.
- Γαλαντόμος, Ι. 2008. *Η διδασκαλία των μεταφορών και των ιδιωτισμών της νέας ελληνικής ως ξένης/ δεύτερης γλώσσας*. Διδακτορική διατριβή. Βόλος.
- Γούτσος, Δ. 2003. Σώμα Ελληνικών Κειμένων: Σχεδιασμός και υλοποίηση. *Πρακτικά του 6ου Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου Ελληνικής Γλωσσολογίας*. Πανεπιστήμιο Κρήτης, 18–21 Σεπτεμβρίου 2003.
- Cacciari C. & S. Glucksberg. 1995. Understanding Idioms: Do Visual Images Reflect Figurative Meanings? *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 7.283–305.
- Δεμίρη-Προδρομίδου, Ε., Δ. Νικολαΐδου-Νέστορα, & Ν. Τρύφωνα-Αντωνοπούλου. 2002. *Η γλώσσα των ιδιωτισμών και των εκφράσεων*. Θεσσαλονίκη: University Studio Press.
- Davidson, D. 1978. What Metaphors Mean. In *On Metaphor*, ed. by S. Sacks. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gibbs, R.W. 1998. The Fight over Metaphor in Thought and Language. In *Figurative Language and Thought*, ed. by J. J. Katz, C. Cacciari, R.W. Gibbs and M. Turner, 88–117. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kovecses, Z. & P. Szabó. 1996. Idioms: A View from Cognitive Semantics. *Applied Linguistics* 17.326–355.
- Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Low, G. 1988. On teaching metaphor. *Applied Linguistics* 9.125–147. Oxford University Press.
- Σγουρούδη, Δ. 2003. *Η Μεταφορά και η Συμβολή της στη Γλώσσα*. Αθήνα: Κριτική.
- Steinvall, A. 2002. *English Colour Terms in Context*. Skrifter från moderna språk 3. Institutionen för moderna språk, Umeå universitet.
- Ting-Fang Wu. 2007. *The Color Term Hei (black) in Mandarin Chinese: A Cognitive Semantics Study*. Master Thesis. Providence University.
- Χριστίδης Α.-Φ. 2001. Η φύση της γλώσσας. In *Ιστορία της ελληνικής γλώσσας: Από τις αρχές έως την Ύστερη Αρχαιότητα*, ed. by Α.-Φ. Χριστίδης, 21–52. Θεσσαλονίκη: Κέντρο Ελληνικής Γλώσσας & Ινστιτούτο Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών [Ίδρυμα Μανόλη Τριανταφυλλίδη].
- Χριστίδης, Α.-Φ. 1999. Όψεις της μεταφοράς. In *Γλώσσα και νόηση*, ed. by Δ. Κατή, Μ. Κονδύλη & Β. Νικηφορίδου, 197–206. Αθήνα: Αλεξάνδρεια.