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## METAPHORICAL ASPECTS OF SELECTED SIGNS IN POLISH SIGN LANGUAGE

Cognitive linguistics studies language as a reflection of human mind. Many cases of concept-formation are based on metaphor. Though most of the analyses point out to the presence of metaphor in natural languages, also sign languages involve this conceptual mechanism. Comparative analysis of linguistic expressions and signs for such fundamental concepts as *time*, *support*, *illness*, and others, proves that they reflect the same conceptual metaphors. This, in turn, supports the Generalisation Commitment and the Cognitive Commitment as fundamental hypotheses of cognitive linguistics.

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary cognitive linguistics assumes that language is a reflection of human conceptual system. A large part of our concepts are based on metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; 1999).

Most cognitive linguistic analyses focus on non-literal aspects of natural languages, such as English, Hungarian, and others (Kövecses 2002; 2005). Less attention is being devoted to the analysis of sign languages, though the non-literal, mainly metaphorical character of them, is generally recognized (Taub 1997 qtd. in Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 86).

The present analysis shows how selected elements of Polish sign language are structured by conceptual metaphor. In each case, they are set against the natural language expressions which are related to the analysed concepts. There appears to be a close similarity between natural and sign languages as far as the presence of metaphor is concerned.

## 2. Sign language

At first, a few words should be said about the sign language itself. It is used by the deaf and it can be described as a 'as a set of signs based on mimics and pantomime, which refer to individual letters or whole words, with configuration of fingers of both hands, of the hands themselves and the body as a whole being the characteristic properties of each individual sign' (Szczepankowski 1968: 8).

As a system, sign language has many features in common with spoken language. It has levels corresponding to phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics (Yule 1991: 159-165; Perlin and Szczepankowski 1992). Instead of sound, its substance is formed by different configurations of hands and body, as well as mimics; morphemes are expressed by individual signs; syntax is reflected by the order in which the signs are performed, which often corresponds to word order of a natural language; semantics is to be found in the so called articulatory parameters of individual signs, that is differences between the individual configurations, orientation, position and movement of palms, hands, and body, as well as the differences in mimics accompanying them. (Yule 1991: 161).

Ideographic signs, which express concepts or words, form a major part of Polish sign language. The majority of them refer to objects and activities, but some express abstract concepts, e.g. 'time'. The number of signs – around 5000 – is limited in comparison with the number of concepts in natural language (Szczepankowski 1968: 8).

It is possible to combine ideographic and dactylographic signs. The latter signs are based exclusively on the movements of fingers and denote letters of the alphabet (Szczepankowski 1968: 8-9).

## 3. Conceptual metaphor

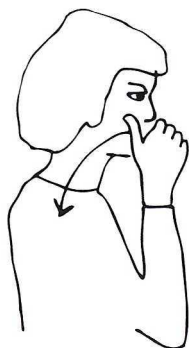
Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) argue that metaphor functions on different levels of language and communication. It is a conceptual mechanism which involves a source domain and a target domain. The target domain is usually abstract while the source domain is typically concrete and directly grounded in human experience. They provide the example of the metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, which underlies the following everyday expressions (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 48):

- (1) I *see* what you're saying
- (2) What's your *outlook* on that?
- (3) Now I've got the *whole picture*
- (4) That's an *insightful* idea
- (5) The argument is *clear*
- (6) It was a *murky* discussion
- (7) Could you *elucidate* your remarks?

The correlation between knowledge and visual perception, which exists almost since the moment of birth, forms the experiential basis of this metaphor. Eyesight is a fundamental source of information about the external world. The metaphor functions whenever the domain of visual perception is used to conceptualise instances of having knowledge which do not involve the actual use of eyesight (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 48).

#### 4. Metaphor in Polish sign language

The first metaphors to be discussed are the ones connected with the concept of time. Signs for such concepts as [1] 'yesterday', [2] 'past', [3] 'former' and [4] 'bygone',



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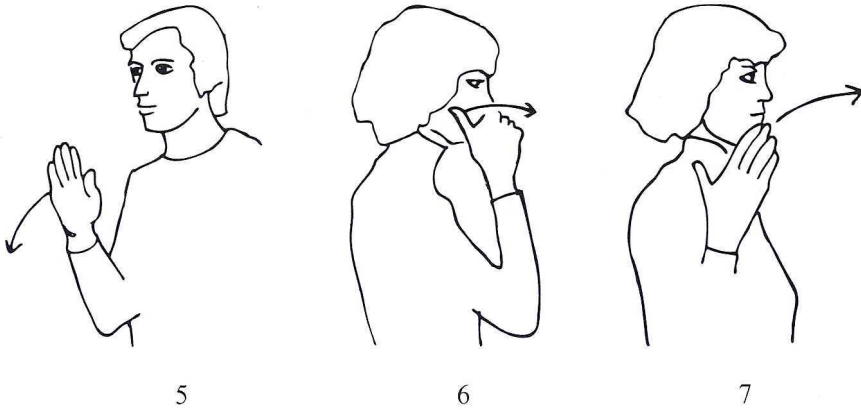
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irrespective of the individual differences in the configurations of the hands and fingers, have an integral common property, which is the movement of the hand

in the direction behind the signer. They all reflect the conceptual metaphor TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 141-145). In everyday language the metaphor underlies the following expressions, all of which imply that events past are located behind us:

- (8) Wielkanoc jest już *za nami*  
Easter has already *passed*
- (9) Weekend szybko *minął*  
The weekend has *gone by* quickly
- (10) Semestr *został z tyłu*  
The semester is *behind us*
- (11) Nie oglądaj się na rzeczy *przeszłe*  
Don't look *back* into the past.

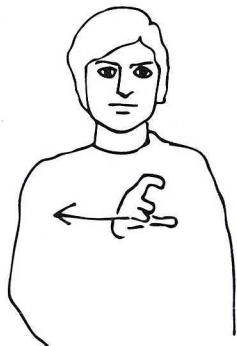
In contrast to that, concepts such as [5] 'will be', [6] 'tomorrow', and [7] 'future' are



expressed by means of signs which, again in spite of the individual differences, all share the property of the movement of the hand towards the area in front of the signer. They all reflect the metaphor TIME IS STATIONARY AND WE MOVE IN TIME – the signer uses the signs which suggest his/her movement towards a point in front of him, that is towards the future (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 145-148). The same metaphor is reflected in the following everyday expressions:

- (12) *Zbliżamy się do końca*  
We're *approaching* the end
- (13) Już *blisko do wakacji*  
We're *getting close to* the holidays
- (14) On wkrótce *dojdzie do 40-stki*  
He'll soon *be at* 40.

The concept of [8] 'time' itself is also signed metaphorically.



8

The sign is a combination of dactylographic and ideographic elements (Szczepankowski 1974: 40; Szczepankowski and Rona 1994). The configuration of the fingers of the right hand reflects the letter 'c', which is the first letter of the Polish word 'czas' (Eng. 'time'). The horizontal movement of the hand suggests the passage of time. The whole sign reflects the source domain of the metaphor TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT, which also underlies the following everyday expressions:

(15) *Czas płynie*

*Time flows*

(16) *Czas mija*

*Time passes.*

The sign in question is related to the most common conception of time – the linear time. It is attributed to the English physicist Isaac Newton (McGrath and Kelly 1986: 35-42).

Both these metaphors of time have the same experiential basis. It is related to the passage of time which accompanies physical movement or the observation of the movement of people or objects (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 52).

The next sign to be interpreted is the one for the concept of [9] 'help'.



9

The left hand, with all fingers close to one another and the palm held open, moves upward till it makes contact with the right hand, whose all fingers but the thumb are also close to one another. Both hands are placed at a right angle. The whole sign expresses the concept of 'support'. That concept forms the source domain of the metaphor HELP IS SUPPORT, which underlies the following expressions:

- (17) W rodzinie znalazł *oparcie*  
His family *supported* him
- (18) Wspieraj policje  
*Support* the police
- (19) Nie dał jej finansowego *wsparcia*  
He didn't *support* her financially.

The experiential basis of the metaphor is related to the fact that both people and objects may need physical support in order to be able to function in a normal way (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 52).

The sign for the concept of [10] 'sickness'



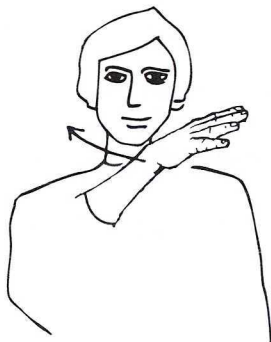
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involves the movement of the forefinger and the middle finger of the right hand downward until they come into contact with the forefinger of the left hand. The fingers of both hands are placed close to each other, and the hands are held at an obtuse angle. Such sign reflects the conceptual metaphor SICKNESS IS DOWN, which can be illustrated by means of the following expressions (Lakoff and Johnson 1988: 37; 1980: 15):

- (20) *Zapadł* na zdrowiu  
He *fell* ill
- (21) *Powaliła* go grypa  
He *came down* with the flu
- (22) On *podupada* na zdrowiu  
His health is *declining*.

The experiential basis of the metaphor is the fact that sick people are often forced to lie down (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 15).

The last sign to be discussed is the one for the concept of [11] ‘optimism’.



11

The right hand, with all fingers but the little one held close to one another and placed at a sharp angle in front of the face of the signer, makes a half-rounded upward movement to the left. The sign reflects the conceptual metaphor POSITIVE EMOTIONAL STATE IS UP. The same metaphor also underlies the following natural language expressions, the first of which is from Lakoff and Johnson (1988: 37; 1980: 15):

(23) To *podniosło* mnie na duchu

That *boosted* my spirits

(24) Spróbuj *podtrzymać* ją na duchu

Try to keep her spirits *up*.

The experiential basis for the metaphor is that an erect posture typically accompanies a positive emotional state (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 15).

## 5. Conclusions

The above-conducted analysis proves that metaphor is common in Polish sign language, which underscores the universal character of this conceptual mechanism. Its presence in this sign language, limited in its inventory of symbols, proves that it is based on the same conceptual principles as the natural Polish language.

Apart from that, the metaphorical element of the Polish, as well as any other sign language, is connected with two fundamental hypotheses of cognitive linguistics. Evans and Green (2006: 27-44) call them the *Generalisation Commitment* and the *Cognitive Commitment*.

The Generalisation Commitment assumes the existence of common structural principles on different levels of language analysis. The above-discussed examples show that metaphor functions not only on the levels of lexis and syntax, but also in a system that substitutes for ordinary verbal communication in a given lan-

guage. In all likelihood, it also is an element of gestures used in everyday communication by people with no impairment of hearing.

The Cognitive Commitment assumes that the principles governing the structure of language should agree with the general principles of human cognitive system. The presence of conceptual metaphor in sign language, be it Polish or any other language, emphasizes its role as a conceptual rather than purely linguistic phenomenon (Evans and Green 2006: 43-44).

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