

## UNDERSTANDING METAPHORICAL TEXTS IN FOREIGN LITERATURE

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In this paper, I present a research where I investigate learners' understanding of a metaphorical text in foreign literature. Nine senior students who take English as a major at a federal university in the Goiás State - Centre-West region in Brazil – were participants in this qualitative and interpretative research. They were engaged in a collaborative method of understanding known as thinking aloud, in an attempt to understand the metaphors contained in an American poem by poet Robert Frost. I use theories about foreign culture learning and theories of conceptual metaphors to support this study. The results show that, despite some drawbacks in their attempts, due mainly to cultural differences, students were able to understand the basic metaphors in the literary text. I also demonstrate, through data analysis, that students' historicity and source-culture enabled them to apprehend the global metaphorical meaning of the poem.

**Keywords:** Foreign literature reading, Conceptual metaphors, Verbal protocol, Students' intercultural understanding.

### Introduction

The foreign language literature classroom is a place of meeting and confrontation, with oneself and with others. It is a rare space where the students' self, nourished and sculpted in a certain cultural environment, is put face to face to others, through their written production, that brings in itself the indelible marks of another cultural universe. The confrontation that emerges from this meeting does not always reach a harmonic synthesis. Learning to deal with English literatures in the Modern Languages courses, in Brazil, means for students to feel themselves in foreign territory, with the burden of excitement for the unknown intertwined with the discomfort that this misplacement might generate.

Studying the others' literature in their language imply conversing with distinct solutions for the many questions of existence. In defiance of the fact that all human beings have the same basic needs and must deal with survival, sheltering and food issues, the alternatives found for these questions are not the same for all the peoples. Even the wording to refer to them are not equal everywhere (DAMEN, 1987). Reading foreign literatures means learning to reason differently, under a distinct viewpoint of the world (SWIDERSKI, 1993). As Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016: 129) posit, in this contact with the foreign language, no ideal and perfect method encompasses all kinds of classroom and all types of students.

In this paper, I discuss the issue of students' understanding of metaphorical texts in foreign literature. The Brazilian participants in this study were involved in a comprehension process of a literary text in English, in which they socialized their personal concepts in the interlinguistic and intercultural reading. The study is founded on an incipient paradigm in the studies concerning metaphor, under the influence of

cognitivist psychology, that conceives metaphor as a primary organizer of thought and daily language, besides having the indeterminacy of meaning as its core feature. The results demonstrate that the students' experience in sharing their individual meanings offered them the opportunity of a richer and deeper knowledge of the metaphorical concepts in the foreign language literary text.

### **Theoretical Assumptions**

In this section, I discuss the influence of culture in the high education studies on foreign literature, narrowing for the understanding of metaphor in the reading of literary texts in a language that is not the reader's mother tongue.

#### **1 The cultural encounter in the foreign literature classroom**

The definitions of culture are various and diverse, and the disagreement on what constitutes its range is quite strong. Kramsch (1995:84) articulates two predominant ways of defining culture: human sciences conceive it as "the way a social group represents itself and others through its material productions." These material productions include art works, daily life artifacts, social institutions, and literature. For social sciences, culture refers to values and notions shared by a group, which result from its way of viewing the world and determining what is acceptable or not.

In this paper, connately with the sociological conception, I use Geertz's (1973) definition, for whom culture is a system of shared meanings:

"a historically transmitted semiotic network constructed by humans and which allows them to develop, communicate and perpetuate their knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about the world" (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 89).

Understanding the others' culture implies learning to acknowledge this discrete view of the world. Given that each people organizes its social life and its view of the world in a peculiar and particular way, culture is something unique, and it cannot be totally and utterly equaled to another one, in any aspect at all. Seelye e Wasilewski (1996) postulate that culture, more than any other frontier, acts as a demarcator of a group. From the authors' perspective, the traditional borders of race, nationality or ethnicity are fake: the cognitive and affective systems collectively shared – in other words, culture – are the true definers of human beings. These systems are arbitrary, certainly, but they shape "our worldview more so than political or ideological divisions" (p.62).

The foreign literature student, more than learning to analyze literary works in another language, is involved in what Damen (1987) called 'a personal journey of cultural discovery' (p. 53). For the author, in order to possibilitate an efficient intercultural communication, it is necessary that students get engaged in the process of learning to learn a new culture. A way to provide this opportunity of learning for Modern Languages students is to give them the chance of interacting with the literary texts, on their own, doing their "personal and critical reading"<sup>1</sup> (REES, 2003: 74). This process generally implies triggering a high level of anxiety, as Elaldi (2016) avows. Nonetheless, through collaborative work, this tension might be overcome, and students may achieve beneficial resultances, which is confirmed by the data analysis presented in this paper.

#### **2 Understanding the metaphor in the foreign literary text**

Over more than two thousand years, since the *Poetics*, by Aristotle, in the 4th- century a.c, metaphor has been understood as a figure of speech used to refer to something in terms of another, whose sole function

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<sup>1</sup> "leitura crítica e pessoal." My translation.

consisted on the embellishment of discourse. There would not have any place for metaphor in the field of science, that should focus on the objective reality, as conceived by Descartes's rationalism, Comte's positivism, Lock's empiricism or Kant's critical idealism, among other lines of thought in Western philosophy. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), nevertheless, circumscribing metaphor to that poetical function is ignoring one of the most basic processes of human thought. As claimed by the authors, human thought is highly structured in metaphorical terms: things are understood in terms of others, routinely, in a conventional process learned since childhood. They profess that metaphor "is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 4).

This new conception of metaphor fits an epistemological model designed initially in the seventies. For this relatively new paradigm, daily language reflects this immense metaphorical structuring, which conditions not only a considerable part of thought but also our lifestyle and behaviour. Hence, metaphorical thought "resides at the core of our everyday activity in the world." (LANTOLF, 1999: 42).

Counteracting the very foundations of Objectivism, that defends objective reality and its precise meanings, metaphor has been seen as bringing in its bosom the indeterminacy of meaning (ZANOTTO, 1998). This conception of metaphor opposes the notion that words have intrinsic meanings attached to them and that communication would be the act of conveying these packs of meanings, that must be opened by the interlocutors, understanding them in the same way they were sent. Reddy (1979) named this view of language as conduit metaphor. Discussing this metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point to the fact that it hides essential facets of the communicative process: meanings do not dispense with people and contexts; words do not have meaning in themselves, regardless the context and speakers. Moura (1997:4) punctuates that "words are, therefore, essentially undetermined, and the metaphorical construction just amplifies this indeterminacy<sup>2</sup>." In the particular situation of reading foreign literary texts – the focus of this paper –, it is necessary to consider the fact that metaphors might produce distinct interpretations due to their indeterminacy of meaning.

According to Bakhtin's dialogism, there is a mutual influence between language and culture. In their discussion of those constructs to the Russian philosopher's view, Morgan and Cain (2000) display metaphor as an example of deictic discourse<sup>3</sup> in which the hardest difficulty of the foreign readers resides, quite often, in the fact that they do not share the author's culturally established referential. Lantolf (1999) explains this difficulty on the fact that metaphors reflect the distinct organization of the world in individual cultures. When the metaphorical concepts are widely different, understanding them requires an arduous mental effort, because it demands from the readers that they put themselves on the other's cultural shoes, in their attempt to comprehend the constructs under their particular viewpoint.

In a paper ulterior to the one already mentioned here, Lakoff and Turner (1989) extend the theory of metaphor as an organizer of everyday discourse to the poetical metaphor. According to the authors, one can understand poetry only because poets use the same thought tools as the readers. Metaphor is, for them, one of the most essential tools of thinking, poetically or not: it is automatic, ubiquitous, conventional, irreplaceable and accessible to everyone. The poetic act takes the common ways of thought and expands them, elaborating and combining them extraordinarily.

Having presented the theoretical foundations this paper is assented on, I will display the research carried out, in the next section.

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<sup>2</sup> "As palavras são essencialmente indeterminadas, e a construção metafórica apenas amplifica essa indeterminação." My translation.

<sup>3</sup> The authors present the deictic discourse as the one which points out to something external, as the occurrence of another voice in the same statement. (MORGAN and CAIN, 2000:15).

## The Study

### 1 Methodology

To collect data in this qualitative and interpretive research (COHEN et al., 2000), I recorded a lesson when the students discussed the poem *The Oven Bird*, by Robert Frost.

As a group, they tried to understand the poem, together, using the introspective method called “verbal protocol” or “thinking aloud” (ZANOTTO, 1998). The metaphor they had to analyse was the *oven bird*, besides trying to understand the general meaning of the poem. In this social reading event, students discussed the sense of the text to each one, individually, trying to reach an overall shared meaning. The discussion lasted the whole lesson, during one hour and forty minutes, taking out ten minutes for classroom routine procedures.

The students had already read the poem previously, with some others by the same author, before they went to class, but they did not know the lesson would focus on that specific literary text. Using the common procedure in the collaborative verbal protocol, the lesson observed began with the professor asking the students to read the chosen poem and writing down any ideas evoked by this reading, freely. After that, the group discussed their opinions. The participants received no help from me, as their professor, regarding the comprehension of the text, except for the initial introduction about the Brazilian correspondent to the *oven bird*, and two guiding questions throughout the whole discussion. I explained the bird gets its name from its nest, whose dome and entrance resemble an old fashioned Dutch oven, and elicited from students its name in Portuguese. They readily identified it as the Brazilian *João-de-barro*. Apart from that, there was no intervention from me whatsoever. Moreover, the students had no previous knowledge of the theoretical assumptions of this paper regarding metaphor.

As it was common in the foreign language and literature classes in that Modern Languages course, the language used in the classroom was English.

This is the poem:

The Oven Bird

There is a singer everyone has heard,  
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,  
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.  
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers  
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.  
He says the early petal-fall is past  
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers  
On sunny days a moment overcast;  
And comes that other fall we name the fall.  
He says the highway dust is over all.  
The bird would cease and be as other birds  
But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

### 2 The participants

The participants in this study were nine senior students in the Modern Languages: English course, in a federal university in the state of Goiás – Centre-West region in Brazil. All students chose nicknames for

themselves, to protect their privacy. As their professor, I took part in the study as a participant observer. By the time I collected data, students had already studied English literatures, as compulsory subjects, for two years.

### Data Analysis

Rosenblatt (1994) avouches that there is no such a thing as an absolute meaning of the literary text independent of the reader. In other words, a meaning existent on its own, previously determined by the author, is an impossibility. I share the same view. It was not my intention, in that lesson observed, to verify whether the students would be able to “discover” the hidden meaning Robert Frost had embedded in the text. I find it necessary to highlight, nonetheless, that the author’s thought is indeed expressed in the poem. Moreover, as attested by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the thought is structured metaphorically, which leads to the students’ requisite interaction with the metaphorical concepts of the text. I took into account, on the other hand, the fact that metaphor brings in its nature the indeterminacy of meaning, which opens the range of possible interpretations without, however, allowing for any illogical imposition of meaning.

The poem chosen for this study, as the vast majority of literary works do, presents itself as a metaphorical text at two levels. Initially, it explores several distinct metaphors. At the other level, it might be understood as a metaphorical whole. I expected from my students to explore both echelons. Among the many metaphors contained at the first level, they were asked to try to understand the meaning of only one: the *oven bird*. As a second task, they should try to clutch an overall interpretation of the poem. I selected, for this paper, a few extracts of their discussion.

#### 1 Understanding the metaphor: the *oven bird*

After reading the poem individually, students conversed about the meaning of the *bird*. After some distinct exegeses, students came to the conclusion that the *oven bird* referred to the person who creates poetry – a poet in general.

The discussion began with Joe, presenting his interpretation that the *oven bird* would mean the United States of America:

Joe: *In my point of view, the bird symbolizes the American people, I mean, as a source of a new generation, a population that will bring to all humankind a new midsummer, and this midsummer will be full of fruits and blooms and showers of happiness, all controlled by American capitalism. (...) All the power of the world concentrated on these man and women that are born on this American soil. Remember that the bird is a bird that works a lot, building its house from mud. Well, this is my point of view, maybe I think... I believe the bird symbolizes the power of the American people.*

Under Joe’s standpoint, the fact that the oven bird is a kind of bird that builds its nest from mud, through hard work, evokes this part of the American dream that hard work produces everlasting results: the nation’s economical power was to be established and acknowledged worldwide based on the people’s efforts. The bird would mean, ergo, this country that managed to upend an empire from the persistent work on the ground. This rationale Caio opposes to:

Caio: *Isn’t the bird innocent? Cause he says: “who knows in singing not to sing.”*

In Caio’s opinion, it did not make any sense to compare the meaning of the bird as a country that would brag about having at hand “*all the power of the world*,” with the modesty educed in the act of knowing “*in singing not to sing*.” The bird in the poem, in his standpoint, did not join the other spring birds. Instead, it would have a more secluded attitude.

After Caio's intervention, three other students expressed their judgement:

Roberta: *For me, the bird is a normal human being who has to survive many kinds of situation, being unequal to everybody, as we are God's children.*

Meg: *Yeah, and for me, it represents something that is considered old-fashion because here there's a line, the fourth line: (she reads) He says that "for flowers leaves are old"... maybe something that can't produce beautiful and good things anymore as it used to generate. It can be a country, or a person, anything. I wrote 'something.'*

Lisa: *For me, the bird is our conscience, this voice of the conscience telling us that we have to replace old-fashion things, we have to change.*

Roberta centered attention on the oxymoronic singularity of the *oven bird* – *being unequal to everybody* – in its similarity with the others – *a normal human being*. Contrariwise, Lisa's and Meg's reading were alike, in that the *oven bird*, for both of them, was associated tantamount to changes throughout time, be it in terms of its incapacity of maintaining its production quality as time goes by, as stated by Meg, or in the sense of enjoining the adaptation to a new era, as Lisa defended.

The student Virginia introduced, afterward, the notion of the bird as the poet:

Virginia: *I see this opinion, but I think the oven bird is the poet or poets in general. (...) It says: (reading) "The bird would cease and be as other birds." They have the responsibility to see beyond the things that people in general see.*

Virginia's reasoning to understand the *oven bird* was based on the fact that it was a very different bird from others. It represented, for her, a poet: a human being very distinct from the rest of mankind. She displays the consideration of the poetic act as a result of the perennial deautomatization of the eyesight, an outcome of the vision beyond the obvious things, based on the metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING. Virginia soon obtains other classmates' support to her interpretation of the bird as the poet:

Lisa: *Yes, and they have the responsibility to see new things, not to be copying.*

Meg: *To create.*

Virginia: [<sup>4</sup>*To create.*

Caio: *I think we can see that it's like people. People are humans; birds are birds. But there are some people who are different. This bird is different. It's the only one that builds its home like this. The others make a nest; this one builds a house.*

Meg: *Yes, a home. The others make a house; he builds a home.*

Caio: *Yes.*

Meg: *And he knows he's different, but he wants to keep on being different.*

Lisa: [*And he wants to keep different.*

From the previous metaphor, students moved to SEEING IS CREATING. Caio expanded the metaphor uttered by his mates to CREATING IS CONSTRUCTING. Beginning with this idea, the students acquiesced with that metaphor initiated by Virginia and made an incursion through what they considered the art of poetical creation, in the words the poem uses to refer to the bird.

In the speeches transcribed below, students emphasized the loneliness of the literary creation, as it was manifest in the *oven bird*'s solitary life. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call the attention to the fact that metaphors usually make use of only some facets of the source domain that are adequate to the target domain. In the case of the source area here explored – the *oven bird* that sings in the middle of

<sup>4</sup> I used the signal [ to indicate when students juxtapose their speeches.

summer –, loneliness is one of its features which are readily suitable to the writer at the moment of the poetical creation:

Jane: *Cause this bird lives a lonely life, yes, it's lonely like the*

Meg: *[like the oven bird itself.*

In her confirmation of Jane's statement, one perceives a seeming contradiction in Meg's speech: *the bird lives a lonely life like the oven bird itself?* It is possible to realize, however, the logical manifestation of the metaphorical thought in her apparent discursive lapse. In accepting the interpretation of the literary creator as represented by the bird, the student already visualizes the poet in her classmate's *oven bird*. If we proceeded to the replacement of the origin domain by the target domain, these conversation shifts would sound like this:

Jane: *Cause the poet lives a lonely life, yes, it's lonely like the*

Meg: *[like the oven bird itself.*

Reinforcing this new understanding, furthermore, students discuss the ability in dealing with the metaphorical language, which is widely considered as a sign of accomplished writers.

Lisa: *What do you understand when he says: (reading) "but that he knows is singing not to sing"? What do you understand?*

Roberta: *Which line?*

Meg: *12*

Lisa: *Yes, 12.*

Meg: *He's an expert. Maybe he understands every singing; he's an expert in singing. The singing is metaphors.*

More than music, the bird makes propositions – “he says,” “he says,” “he says,” “he knows,” “he frames,” in a discourse that is more human than ornithological. The bird's thunderous songs are more music of knowledge than of euphoric celebration. Noninterchangeably with Caio, who saw in its singing a humble attitude, Meg considered it an expert. These distinct interpretations illustrate the indeterminacy of meaning carried out by metaphor. The student mentions specifically the artful use of metaphor as the confirmation of the bird/poet's expertise. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphor is an ordinary tool that we use unconscious and automatically – the same one which is dealt with dexterity in poetry: “But great poets, as master craftsmen, use basically the same tools we use; what makes them different is their talent for using these tools, and their skill in using them, which they acquire from sustained attention, study and practice.” (p. xi).

The student's speech might also be seen as establishing a relation with the covering character of metaphor. When she utters that the *oven bird's* singing is metaphorical, Meg foregrounds the fact that, at the same time it sings, the bird does not sing. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) formulate that, at the same time metaphor enlightens the comprehension of characteristics of a concept in terms of another, it hides other features of the same concept, the ones that would have no consistency within the new domain. Thus, it reveals and hides, simultaneously.

Another point accentuated by the participants is that the literary creation has permanence. They presented comments on the durability of the leaf-covered dome created by the *oven bird*, comparing it to the poetical doing:

Lisa: *After he dies, his house is there, it remains. He's worried about building something that will continue to be.*

Meg: *I don't understand anything about birds, but I imagine how long it takes him to build his house. Maybe it takes the author, the poet, a long time to write a poem, just like the bird takes long to make its nest.*

Joe: *I was thinking something that perfectly fits what was said here. You build something very neatly, very in love, you put all your affection on that to give it to mankind: it's not your stuff. It's something you write for the benefit of all the generations ahead.*

Meg: *And the poem was written almost a hundred years ago and is still here.*

Joe: *Yeah, maybe that's the message.*

Lisa: *I remember. The first time I saw this house, the nest, my mother told me that the bird made this home and after his death, the house remains. So I asked: why doesn't he look for another house? Why does he build one? Why doesn't he go looking for another's? If the nest is still there, it's just to find another and live there. Mum told me: no, he has to build it up. It's important for him to construct.*

Here, the students advance to the metaphor CREATING POETRY IS CONSTRUCTING, which reflects the more general metaphor WRITING IS CONSTRUCTING. They compare several aspects of the poetical act to the constructor's deeds: the intention of durability, the hard and time-consuming job, the permanence of the creation, outliving the creator. Lisa concludes her comments on the long-lasting feature of the *oven bird's* product by telling an episode that happened to her, bringing the poem to her familiar universe. Stories are very common in the foreign literature and language classes. According to Ollerenshaw (2002), narratives help people better understand the experiences they go through. Thus, in her search to comprehend the poem written in the American cultural universe, the student associates the bird to her childhood experience, sharing her personal meaning.

In their attempt to understand the poetical action as the oven bird's activity, the students went on discussing the last two lines of the poem:

Caio: *There's something I'm in doubt: (reading) "The question that he frames in all but words is what to make of a diminished thing." I'm in doubt.*

Meg: *I agree. I'm in doubt too.*

Lisa: *The poem. What it says here.*

Joe: *Maybe the diminished thing is life, I mean, as far as we grow older, close to an end.*

Lisa: *Small things. Well, maybe trying to find pleasure in little things.*

Joe: *Trying to find joy in life simple things, because we think that, we tend to believe that we'll only be happy if we get rich or buy a house or buy a car or make the great trip of our life, and sometimes our happiness is all around us, and people just don't realize it. I'm talking about something that I personally live.*

Virginia: *I think it's the poet again: he makes a poem with little things. As he says "all but words."*

Jane: *"The question that he frames in all but words is what to make of a diminished thing."*

*It's about his poems.*

The students reasoned here about what would be the "diminished thing," presenting some possible interpretations. Joe conveyed his viewpoint that it would be life itself, based on the metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY (the closer we are to death, the shorter the road to be travelled) and LIFE IS A RECIPIENT (with old age, the recipient gets emptier).



Virgínia and Jane, notwithstanding, saw in the diminished thing the raw material that the poet uses for his creation: the small things mentioned by Lisa. Again, in their epexegetis, the students refer to the metaphor CREATING POETRY IS CONSTRUCTING, an activity that the poet could only count on reduced material for:

Jane: *The speaker compares, for example, writing poems to constructing the house, like the last sentence. It's more important that the bird works than writing poems, yeah? In my opinion.*

Virgínia: *Or the opposite.*

Meg: *I think he doesn't mind if it's been a diminished thing.*

Lisa: *Yeah, he makes his house of small things he finds on the ground.*

Virgínia: *Like the poet.*

Lisa: *Yes, like the poet.*

Hence, another student reinforces:

Virgínia: *I think the bird represents the poet because, I mean, the poet couldn't, all the other people are the same, but the poet is different, he constructs his poem.*

Thereupon, together, as their discussion progressed, based on the everyday metaphors that people use ordinarily, the participants came to a collective agreement that the *oven bird* would be a metaphorical reference to the poet.

## 2 The general metaphorical meaning of the poem

In the previous section, the participants of this study discussed their interpretation of some individual metaphors in the poem, especially the meaning of the oven bird. Henceforth, in this section, I present their reasoning concerning what the general sense of the poem would be. Lakoff and Turner (1989) explain this interpretation of the overall message of the poem as an attribution to it of a “global metaphoric structure” (p. 146). They assert the reader finds in the text a source domain that must be mapped onto a target domain. In other words, the ideas and concepts of a field (source) are used to refer to another field (target).

In consonance with the authors, the global metaphorical reading is open and restricted at the same time. The reader has the freedom to choose the target domain, that is, to define what the poem refers to. This choice, however, must obey the frontiers imposed by the poem, being pivotal that the interpretation makes sense or is justified by the poetic elements there present.

Lakoff and Turner (1989) unveil some constraining forces that limit the reading of poetry. One of them is the conventional use of conceptual metaphors that already exist in the human conceptual system, regardless the poem and anterior to it. When one interprets a poem in terms of its general meaning, it is indispensable that the metaphors therein seen are coherent with the conventional public usage. Other restrictions to the freedom in interpreting a poetic text are imposed by the use of common sense beside the conventional metaphors and its iconicity – the connection between the poem form and its meaning, which must be congruous with the global reading. Nevertheless, I reinforce that, as the authors show, in spite of these limiting forces, poems might accept more than one metaphorical reading.

The participants took as the source domain of the poem an *oven bird* that stays in the middle of the woods, during midsummer, singing about other seasons. They started, then, a discussion on what the target-domain could be. They tried to reach an agreement on the general meaning of the poem. Based on the fact that the speaker makes references to some seasons of the year, except for winter, they took them as the basic clue to the global understanding of the text.

### 2.1 The cultural mismatch: the strange

The following excerpt from the participants' conversation show how they tried apprehending the general meaning of the poem based on the seasons of the year therein mentioned:

Meg: *This comparison: mid-summer is to spring as one to ten. One to ten?*

Jane: *The other birds?*

Meg: *I guess. Spring is the season when the birds sing more?*

Caio: *Yeah.*

Roberta: *There are a lot of flowers, more beautiful.*

Joe: *It's sunny. Please, correct me if I'm wrong: which season comes right after summer: fall?*

Meg: *No.*

Joe: *Fall comes before?*

Meg: *No, winter, fall, summer, spring. So spring comes after summer and before winter.*

Lisa: *In America is the same?*

Joe: *So, isn't summer the time when the animals also reproduce? Am I wrong?*

Meg: *Pardon, I think it's the opposite: winter, fall, summer, spring. Don't you remember Christina's wedding on October, in Intercom (a textbook)? Fall and then Christmas.*

Joe: *Oh, yeah. Great Christmas.*

Virginia: *I just know on September twenty-second spring starts.*

As it is possible to observe in the excerpt, the students were not well-succeeded in their attempt to understand the general message of the poem from the discussion of the seasons of the year, due to the fact that they did not know them precisely. Together, they managed to see the percentage association raised in the poem regarding the amount of flowers or birds' songs in midsummer: one tenth of the total existing in spring. As phrased by Brower (1963), summer has only ten percent of the good things in spring. They were not able, though, to perceive midsummer, the time when the *oven bird* sings in the poem, as the middle of life, following the metaphor ONE LIFE IS ONE YEAR. Placing the bird's song in July, the American midsummer, one realizes more than half of the year is gone: "Similarly, life is already half over by the time we reach our peak of maturity, so that no matter how full life seems at that point, it is nonetheless 'a diminished thing'. Once one reaches the top of the hill, everything is downhill from there." (BLUE, 2001:1).

Thus, the moment the bird sings – neither the beginning nor the end of the year, but a middle that evokes the origins as well as the end, and that throws light on the question asked in the last line – was lost in the students' reading. Despite their efforts to remember the order of the seasons in the United States of America, something they had already studied and even taught, as the majority of them were already English teachers (seven participants), their struggle was in vain. This fact might be explained because, in Brazil, there is no emphasis put on the knowledge of the seasons of the year. Except for summer, that is quite celebrated in the country, as it coincides with the end-of-the-year vacations, when a high number of crowds populate the beaches, the only information that is quite clear for the majority of Brazilians is the same remarked by Virginia: on September 22nd spring has already started.

When trying to deal with seasons in the poem, the participants faced the strange, something that was distant, culturally speaking, which generated disorientation. That is a common phenomenon when people deal with elements of a culture that they do not have a relation of belonging with. In the next section, albeit, it will be possible to see how they managed to construe meaning conjointly.

## 2.2 Elaborating meaning

While the participants were culturally prevented from interpreting the speaker's mentions to the seasons of the year, as I evidenced in the previous session, they were able to reach an agreement concerning the global meaning of the poem, using other resources. After much reasoning, they finally pointed life with its ups-and-downs as the target domain of the poem, after a brief intervention from the professor:

Professor: *Lots of you said something about different periods (...) what does the poem represent?*

Vitória: *It can be birth and death.*

Professor: *Go on, please.*

Cris: *It's short like the seasons.*

Joe: *There's some connections to The Raven (a poem by Edgar Allan Poe), but here we see so many positive images, we couldn't say the bird is passing us a pessimist position. As Caio told us, we have a high and a low position, something that was high and something that diminishes, something which goes high and then low... Although we have all these contrasts, deep metaphorical language topics: high/low, flowers/leaves, highway/frame, summer/fall, showers/sunny days. Although we have the contrasts, which also seem like the ups-and-downs of life we've already mentioned, the bird brings a positive sense. It's optimistic. In The Raven, the black bird is a portrait of death.*

Thus, the participants elaborated a shared meaning for the poem: it would represent life as a journey whose initial point would be birth and whose final destination would be death, with short stages in-between, agnate to the seasons of the year. They could also realize that even the highest moments in existence carry intrinsically in themselves the inevitability of the fall. In spite of the cultural difference between the poet and the readers, the interpretation of the poem was feasible due to the fact that the core metaphor is common for both American and Brazilian societies: LIFE IS A JOURNEY. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989: 9), metaphors like this "are thus not the unique creation of individual poets but are rather part of the way members of a culture have of conceptualizing their experience." It is this common terrain between poets and readers that make it possible to understand the poetic metaphor.

## Conclusion

This study shows the possibility of students in a group work attaining the fathom of a literary text in a foreign language. Even though there were several obstacles represented by the act of reading literature in another language, such as the distinct structuring of the world and the barrier of vocabulary, the participants' collaborative work could lead them to a copacetic interpretation of English poetry, not lagging behind native speakers, who share the same cultural framework with the poet.

Making use of the method known as collaborative thinking aloud, Brazilian university students in this research could make an incursion through the metaphors contained in a poem in the English language. Metaphor was depicted, in this study, not as a mere figure for the adornment of language, but as an organizer of everyday discourse. Even though the students lacked knowledge regarding the seasons of the year in North America, which led them to miss many relevant references in the poem, they were able to ascertain the crucial metaphors of the text and its global metaphorical meaning. This understanding was facilitated because the cultures from both author and readers, though very distinct, shared some basic conceptual metaphors.

The study is lined up under the badge of studies that see metaphor as a discourse organizer, which contains in its bosom the indeterminacy of meaning. Within the limits of the source domain, the students were able to grasp distinct meanings in the target domain.

The work with metaphors in the foreign language and literature classroom might serve as a valuable source of discussion of cultural differences and, at the same time, make use of the common territory so

that students may be able to have their personal reading and acquire a well-grounded understanding of the foreign text. When the students help each other mutually, in an atmosphere of reciprocal respect and encouragement, their collaborative work might substantially contribute to achieving this goal, as this study adequately demonstrates.

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