From ‘sight’ to ‘lightning’: On the cultural basis for metonymy

1. Aims & Background

- This research aims at an anthropological critique of research on figurative language especially under the guise of the theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics.
- Cognitive Linguistics emphasizes the study of meaning as arising from the construal of conceptual content in situations of language use (Crott and Cruse 2004).
- As such, Cognitive Linguistics is an ideal theoretical framework in which to “investigate how cultural knowledge manifests in the most important ‘official’ semiotic mode of culture, discursive language.” (Silberstein 2006: 483)
- However, Cognitive Linguistics analyses have focused on mainly on languages spoken by the researchers themselves.
- This has lead to a “paradox of familiarity” (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984: 284): the sharing of assumptions between researcher, reader and subjects has obscured the need for a more detailed treatment of cultural knowledge in Cognitive Linguistics.
- This study aims to show the importance of the cultural context to the study of figurative lexicalization, focusing on metonymy.

2. Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics

- Metonymy has been defined as: “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model.” (Radden & Kövecses 1999: 21)
- The term mental access must here be understood as an inferential procedure of the hearer: the target is inferred by the hearer on the basis of the evidence made ostensive in the vehicle.
- Metonymies are symbolizations of inferential procedures based on indexical signs: in both cases the association between source and target resides on a presupposed relation encoded in an idealized cognitive model (Keller 1995; Panther 2005).
- Idealized cognitive models are abstractions of ‘real world’ processes that impact an organizing structure (Cienki 2010).
- Idealized cognitive models, however, should not be readily assumed, rather they must be described through ethnography.
- The importance of ethnographic data in these contexts will be demonstrated with data from Athapaskan languages.

3. Athapaskan Languages

- The Athapaskan languages are spoken in three discontinuous geographical regions across the western half of North America.
- The data discussed here are drawn from the sub-group of these languages called Eastern Athapaskan spoken in Alaska-Yukon and California.
- In the north, Athapaskans traditionally lived as Boreal Forest hunter gatherers.
- As expert survivalists, Athapaskan speakers combined empirical knowledge of the natural world with “an elaborate system of supernatural concepts for explaining and manipulating their environment” (Nelson 1983: 15).

4. Lightning in Deg Xinag

- In Deg Xinag, spoken in Alaska, ‘lightning’ is referred to as nititingun.
- This expression is a compound made up of the elements ath’/”thunder” and gun’”fire”.
- In the absence of ethnographic detail, this expression could easily be read as a metaphor with “fire” encoding ‘lightning’.
- However, this compound has a more complicated etymology.
- Data from the closely related Koyukon illuminates the semantics of this term.

5. Cognitive Model of lightning in Koyukon

- Koyukon k’-nol-lik’am-e its-eye-ire-stra
- "Designates especially the peculiar brightness assumed by the eye under the influence of passion, also pupil." Jette & Jones 2000: 343
- The Idealized Cognitive Model of thunder and lightning is built around the mythical creature of the Thunderbird:
- "It is easy to see that noises produced high in the air would be attributed to a bird, and the ‘drumming’ of the ruffed grouse would naturally suggest a like origin for the noise of thunder." (Jette and Jones 2000: 512)

6. Lightning metonymies

- The Deg Xinag expression can now be more appropriately glossed as ‘thunder’s sight’ and reveals itself as a CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy with the sight or gaze of the Thunderbird as the cause of lightning.
- The speaker uses the CAUSE, the sight of the Thunderbird, to refer to the EFFECT, the flashes of lightning.
- The CAUSE and the EFFECT relation that is symbolized in this metonymy are firmly rooted in the idealized cognitive models of this cultural group.
- In Koyukon, inferences from this idealized cognitive model have given rise to further metonymies for lightning:
  - nod rethink’l’ghul ‘the thunderbird twinks his eye’ lit. ‘st. cust. flutters its eyebrows.
  - In other Athapaskan languages, where this model is not used in the explanation of ‘lightning’, very different metonymies arise.
  - As for example in Hupa (spoken in California):
    - k’igwh ‘it forks’

7. Conclusion

- Panter argues that differences in the possible linguistic realizations of metonymy should be added to the research agenda of linguistic typology (Panther 2015).
- However, metonymies emerge from the communicative practices of speakers (events of language use) in which mutual cultural knowledge is presupposed (Keller 1995).
- This leads to the conclusion that this research should factor in cultural differences in which idealized cognitive models are embedded and calls for an ethnographically informed study of metonymy.