

METAPHORS AND METONYMIES OF THE ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN CONCEPTS OF FEAR IN CONTEXT

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Abstract: The paper studies the language of fear in English and Russian and investigates the metaphors and metonymies that contribute to the English and Russian concepts of this universal basic emotion. The paper aims at discussing the role of context in English and Russian linguistic expressions of 'fear' and 'strakh'.

Keywords: context, emotion, fear, meaning making, metaphor, metonymy

1. Introduction: theoretical background and aim of my research

The present paper has been inspired by Kövecses's (2015) volume entitled *Where Metaphors Come from*, in which he studies the role of context in metaphorical meaning construction. After giving a brief theoretical background, I discuss English and Russian metaphors and metonymies of fear and attempt to find out the role of context in metaphorical and metonymical meaning making.

The study of the language of emotion has had a long tradition in cognitive linguistics. Researchers have shown that emotion language is pervaded by figurative expressions (Lakoff 1987, Kövecses 1990, 2000), however, it is a matter of course that there are also literal expressions describing different emotional states. Our emotion vocabulary containing both literal and nonliteral expressions shows the way people belonging to a language community understand the emotional experience in question. Metonymies usually capture physiological and behavioural reactions accompanying an emotional state, while metaphors refer to less easily observable inner bodily experiences (Wierzbicka 1999).

Emotions are complex physiological, behavioural and mental reactions of people to situations and events in which they are involved and to other people with whom they interact. Psychological investigation has shown that emotions can be distinguished with the help of componential analysis (bodily reactions, facial expressions, emotional reactions and a cognitive appraisal of the situation in question – cf. Bányai 2013: 51, Atkinson et al. 1997: 309).

Fear is an "emotion caused by the nearness or possibility of danger, pain, evil, etc." (Hornby 1989). According to the kind of danger that threatens our physical, social, mental, etc. well-being we may show a wide range of complex responses, from taking action to cope with the dangerous situation through escaping from it up to trembling or even being paralyzed and unable to do anything that might help (Lazarus 1991).

Kövecses's *Emotion Concepts* (1990) and *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* (2000) present metonymies and metaphors that depict a number of details of fear, but Kövecses does not investigate the mechanisms by which metonymical and metaphorical meanings come about.

In his 2015 volume entitled *Where Metaphors Come from*, Kövecses studies the process of meaning making in metaphors. In the preface Kövecses states that

meaning construction is always context-based and context is created in a communicative process. He claims that metaphorical meaning construction depends on context, too, by which he means a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors (Kövecses 2015: 1-2).

As a starting point, Kövecses accepts Van Dijk's (2009: 5) definition, stating that "[...] a context is what is defined to be relevant in the social situation by the participants themselves" (Kövecses 2015:1). Kövecses then points out that conceptual metaphor theory cannot account for all metaphorical meaning because "metaphorical meaning does not arise from conceptual metaphors, mappings, or metaphorical entailments, or inferences" (idem:7). He illustrates it by quoting Ritchie's example "*My wife is an anchor*" (Ritchie 2004: 278-279), which is an ambiguous metaphor, if seen out of context. According to Kövecses, who reflects on Ritchie's analysis of the ANCHOR metaphor, it can have the metaphorical meaning 'stability', on the one hand, but it can also mean 'lack of freedom'. In the first case, the speaker intends to say "in times of danger in the course of my life, my wife provides me with the stability I need" (idem: 278, qtd. in Kövecses 2015: 9). In the second case, the speaker talks about the difficulties he has in his life and "blames his wife for his not being able to achieve certain life goals" (idem: 279, qtd. in Kövecses 2015: 9). Kövecses shows that the metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY and HUMAN RELATIONS ARE PHYSICAL CONNECTIONS are used in both situations, while the metaphor EMOTIONAL STABILITY/ STRENGTH IS PHYSICAL STABILITY/ STRENGTH is used in the former, while LACK OF FREEDOM TO ACT IS LACK OF FREEDOM TO MOVE is used in the latter, which explains/creates the difference in meaning (Kövecses 2015: 9).

Cognitive linguistic literature has already proved that metaphors have their corresponding bodily basis, or in other words, are rooted in people's bodily experiences (e.g. MORE IS UP; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Because a lot of our bodily experiences are very similar for all human beings around the world, metaphors that are based on bodily experiences are often viewed as universal or near universal. On the other hand, there are metaphors that capture different aspects of how we perceive the world; therefore they are rather viewed as non-universal, culture-specific variations. Kövecses (2015) finds that metaphor variation is mainly motivated by contextual factors such as "key concepts in a culture, in history, and environment" (Kövecses 2015: 14).

Based on my preliminary studies of English and Russian expressions of fear, I find that there are similarities and differences in the English and Russian vocabulary of fear, both in the use of single words denoting some kind of fear and in complex expressions or sentences that may have either literal or figurative meanings. As a starting point, I accept that context has a crucial role in what words and expressions mean and this is also true of figurative expressions.

First, I shall look at what kinds of fear can be distinguished by fear terms in the two languages and what contexts they are used in. Then, I discuss more complex expressions of fear in my English and Russian corpora and see what metonymies and metaphors they instantiate. Finally, I attempt to find out what role context may have in the meaning construction of the metonymies and metaphors in my corpora.

I have built two corpora containing linguistic expressions of fear and related emotions in English and Russian. For the English corpus, I used The Free Dictionary (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com>) as a source and selected terms

denoting various kinds of fear, and collected example sentences under the headings *fear*, *anxiety*, *nervousness* and *tension*. (Each dictionary entry contains a ‘cite’ section, which gives quotations from Sommer’s (1988) *Similes Dictionary*). For the Russian corpus, I used the Russian National Corpus (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru>), selected terms denoting various kinds of fear, and collected example sentences using *strakh*, *ispug*, *panika* and *trevoga* as search words. Example sentences in both my English and my Russian corpus are figurative expressions, instantiating either metaphors or metonymies or their interactions. (Below I give the English translation of the Russian examples in brackets.)

2. Kinds of fear denoted by English and Russian terms and the contexts in which they are used

Probably the most frequently used terms in relation to the emotion ‘fear’ in English are *fear*, *fright*, *terror*, *horror* and *panic*, while in Russian *strakh*, *ispug*, *uzhas* and *panika*.

The most general and neutral terms are *fear* and *strakh*, which refer to our response when we are faced with some danger that we wish to avoid or when we feel bad and have certain unpleasant physiological reactions. We say things like *I am afraid of heights*, *I am trembling with fear*; *ja bojus’ prostranstva* [‘I am afraid of space’], *ja drozhu ot strakha* [‘I am trembling with fear’].

If the feeling of fear comes suddenly and unexpectedly, we use the words *fright* and *ispug* and by them we usually mean that the emotion only lasts for a relatively short time. The bodily and behavioural reactions of fright can be very similar both for speakers of English and Russian: *he took fright and ran away*; *on s ispugu ubezhal* [‘he ran away in his fright’]. Besides the concept of fright identified as a “notion of short-lived biological fear” (Apresjan 2008: 20), there is another concept “for a very strong short-lasting fear” (ibid.), which exists in both English and Russian. For this concept we use the words *terror* and *uzhas*, respectively. Apresjan (ibid.) claims that the two terms are not totally identical as far as their use is concerned. She claims that, although both *terror* and *uzhas* are accompanied by very similar physiological reactions, like going pale and freezing (*go pale with terror*, *freeze with terror*, *pobelet’ ot uzhasa* [‘turn white with terror’], *uzhas skoval ego* [‘terror shackled him’]), on the one hand, and by similar behavioural reactions like fleeing (*flee in terror*; *ubezhat’ ot uzhasa* [‘run away with terror’]) on the other, the contexts they may occur in are not the same. Apresjan’s examples with their English translations show that English uses two different terms, where Russian uses just one term, *uzhas*:

(1) On s uzhasom smotrel na priblizhavshikhsja banditov
[‘He was looking at the approaching gangsters in terror’] and

(2) On s uzhasom smotrel na obezobrazhennoje telo
[‘He was looking at the mutilated body in horror’] (Apresjan 2008: 20)

In Apresjan’s analysis, the difference lies in the fact that the Russian term *uzhas* has a wider meaning than its English counterpart *terror*: *uzhas* “can refer not only to the feeling of anticipating something very bad, but also to the feeling of being exposed to something very bad that has already happened” (Apresjan 2008: 20). The two kinds of feelings are referred to in examples (1) and (2), respectively.

Finally, *panic* and *panika* seem to refer to practically the same kind of fear, which is a very intense negative emotion implying “complete loss of rational control” (idem: 21), which may result in extreme reactions, like involuntary release of bowels or bladder (Kövecses 1990: 71). Expressions like *be scared shitless* and *nalozhit' v shtany* [‘shit in one’s pants’] may be used to refer to a real physiological reaction or just an imaginary one to describe cowardly behaviour in a derogatory way. In both English and Russian, the context is giving a negative evaluation to a behavioural reaction, no matter whether the expression is used literally or figuratively.

3. Metonymies and metaphors instantiated by the sentences denoting fear in my English and Russian corpora

3.1. The English corpus

Kövecses (1990: 70-74) discusses metonymies of fear in detail and claims that they capture physiological and behavioural reactions that accompany the emotion. Metonymies like INCREASE IN HEART RATE (*His heart pounded with fear.*) exemplify metonymies based on physiological reactions, while FLIGHT STANDS FOR FEAR (*When he heard the police coming, the thief took to his heels.*) exemplifies metonymies based on behavioural reactions. Kövecses (1990: 74-78 and 2000: 23) presents a number of fear metaphors and claims that the metaphor FEAR IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (*Fear was rising in him.*) is very elaborate in English and describes the events in a prototypical scenario of fear. Of course, there are several other metaphors depicting other aspects of our fear experience, which Wierzbicka (1999: 276) refers to as unobservable inner bodily symptoms of individuals.

Analysing my English corpus I find that there are no examples of behavioural reaction metonymies in it, but it contains 14 examples of metonymies instantiating four different physiological effect metonymies, three of which are included in Kövecses’s (1990) analysis. I shall present one example for each:

(3) My heart begins to pound like a thief’s with the police after him – INCREASE IN HEART RATE STANDS FOR FEAR

(4) Felt chilled as by the breath of death’s head – DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE STANDS FOR FEAR

(5) His stomach felt like a volcano about to erupt – NERVOUSNESS IN THE STOMACH STANDS FOR FEAR.

The fourth metonymy instantiated by 8 examples in my English corpus is TENSION IN THE BODY STANDS FOR FEAR, for example:

(6) My back became like a stick

(7) Spines ... stiffened like pulled twine.

The examples show the back and spine area as typical parts of the body where tension accumulates. The number of the instantiations suggests that it is a rather frequent conceptualization of fear, nonetheless it is not mentioned in Kövecses (1990). In the context of examples (3) to (7), the simile part of each sentence describes a specific detail of the physiological effect depicted in the expressions.

My English corpus has 54 metaphorical expressions conceptualizing several different aspects of fear. Seventeen of the metaphorical expressions instantiate the container metaphor. Kövecses (1990, 2000) presents the metaphor FEAR IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER and claims that the container is the human body. My corpus provides 10 examples of specific parts of the body conceptualized as containers for fear, for example the brain, foot, toes and ankle, as in:

(8) Brute terrors [...] filled the more remote chambers of his brain

(9) I pretend my right foot is like a bottle. I pour my fears down into the toes and cork the whole thing at the ankle, so none of my fears can escape into the rest of me.

Examples (8) and (9) prove that it is not only the human body as a whole, but also certain of its parts that may serve as containers for fear. Moreover it must be noted that fear may not only be conceptualized as a fluid in a container (9 examples in my corpus), as suggested in Kövecses's studies (1990, 2000), but also as a substance (8 examples in my corpus), for example:

(10) Fear ... sat heavy in the center of his body like a ball of badly digested food – FEAR IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER.

The term 'heavy' in example (10) helps us to construe the substance reading of fear, the expression 'in the center of his body' specifies the container body part, and the simile in the second half of the sentence reinforces the substance reading of fear by comparing it to 'badly digested food'. Therefore, I claim that sentence 10 instantiates the specific metaphor FEAR IS A FOOD SUBSTANCE IN THE BODY CONTAINER, which is not mentioned in Kövecses (1990 and 2000), and which means that the simile specifies the generic level SUBSTANCE metaphor.

Besides the examples instantiating the container metaphor, there are 37 further metaphorical expressions in which the body and its certain parts serve as locations for fear and some related emotions. The body parts providing locations are the head, face, tooth, chest, heart, stomach/belly, limbs, legs, knees, bones and nerves, and the emotions are fear, terror, panic, worry, anxiety and fright, which are conceptualized as animate/animate-like and inanimate entities. The animate/animate-like entities are personified objects, animals or supernatural beings, while the inanimate entities are technical appliances, natural forces or substances in metaphorical expressions. For example:

(11) Fear ... lay on me like a slab of stone,

where fear is a personified object on the body as a surface location, and

(12) Fear ... clutching at his heart ... as if tigers were tearing him,

where fear is understood as an animal and the heart is an 'operation area' for fear. Furthermore, the contexts provided by the simile parts in both examples reinforce the metaphorical reading of fear by highlighting the images of stone and tiger, respectively. In (13),

(13) Felt (the beginning of) panic, like a giant hand squeezing my heart,

the simile part of the sentence has a special role, which can be tested by comparing (13) to (14):

(14) Felt (the beginning of) panic.

In (13), the metaphorical meaning FEAR/PANIC IS A SUPERNATURAL BEING (whose location/operation area is the heart) is construed easily, because the simile activates the metaphorical image, while the meaning of (14) is more neutral (less specific and consequently less personal), because there is no metaphorical reading that could be construed without the simile.

3.2. The Russian corpus

My Russian corpus contains 14 instantiations of six metonymies, four of which are included in Kövecses (1990) and two are not.

(15) Smotrela na nego s ispugom...
[‘She looked at him with fright...’]

instantiates WAYS OF LOOKING STANDS FOR FEAR;

(16) V eto vremja v komnatu vskol’znul odin iz molodykh. Belyj ot ispuga
[‘At that time one of the young slipped/crept into the room. He was white with fright’]

instantiates CHANGE OF SKIN COLOUR (WHITE FACE) STANDS FOR FEAR;

(17) On s ispugu i ot neozhidannosti lishilsja rechi, skoro perezvonil mne, ne verja v slushevsheesja
[‘He became speechless because of fright and unexpectedness, soon called me up not believing what he heard’]

instantiates INABILITY TO SPEAK STANDS FOR FEAR, while

(18) Inogda rebënok prosto ne reshaetsja sdelat’ chto-libo iz strakha poterpet’ neudachu
[‘Sometimes a child simply is not willing to do anything out of fear of failing’]

instantiates INABILITY TO ACT STANDS FOR FEAR.

Kövecses (1990) does not list TENSION/TIGHTNESS STANDS FOR FEAR and PHYSICAL AGITATION STANDS FOR FEAR, apparently because his corpus does not contain any such examples; however,

(20) U menja chto-to szhalos’ v grudi, kak ot ispuga
[‘I had something tightened in my breast just like due to fright’]

(21) Vsë, ja napugan, ja drozhu ot strakha, i ja nemedlenno nachinaju učit’ zarubezhku
[‘That’s all, I am frightened, I am quivering with fear, and I soon start to study abroad’]

instantiate the TENSION and PHYSICAL AGITATION FOR FEAR metonymies, respectively.

My Russian corpus contains 51 examples of metaphors, most of which are included in Kövecses’s list of metaphors. The metaphors FEAR IS A FLUID and FEAR IS A CONTAINER have three and four instantiations, respectively, for example,

(22) On ponjal tajno i prostuju mysl’ Leny, ot etogo ponimanija ispug pronik v ego serdce...

[‘He understood Lena’s secret and simple thought, because of this understanding fright penetrated into his heart...’]

(23) A ja tut prebyvaju v strakhe i uzchase, osobenno v svjazi s poslednimi sobytijami

[‘And here I am in fear and horror, especially in connection with the latest events’].

The metaphor STRAKH [‘FEAR’] IS AN ENEMY is instantiated by ten examples in my Russian corpus, which highlight different features of the fear experience. The use of the verb *preodolevat* [‘overcome’] highlights the image of an enemy in general, the verb *okhvatyvat* [‘seize’] highlights the image of a vicious enemy (human or animal), while the verb *muchit* [‘torment’] the image of tormentor (cf. Kövecses, 1990: 75), as in (24) (25) and (26), respectively:

(24) Tol’ko togda Kal’vero nachinaet bor’bu, preodolevaja svoj i chuzhoj strakh pered provalom...

[‘Only then does Kal’vero start the fight, overcoming his own and the others’ fear before the failure...’]

(25) No komandir skazal, chto po doroge nel’zja, i Kostju okhvatyval ispug – a vdrug zavedët ne tuda?

[‘But the commander said not to go on the road and Kostja was caught by fright what if it (the road) takes you not there?’]

(26) V etom sluchae ikh ne budet muchit’ strakh, chto oni znachitel’no slabee sverstnikov

[‘In this case, they will not be tormented by the fear that they are much weaker than their peers’].

It is interesting to note that the relatively large number of examples with the image of ‘fear as an enemy’ (15 per cent of my metaphor corpus) indicates that the enemy aspect of the fear experience seems rather salient for the speakers of Russian. It must be admitted, however, that my corpus is rather small, therefore questions about salient features of the fear experience should be further investigated.

Kövecses’s (1990: 75) example *She was sick with fright* instantiates the metaphor FEAR IS AN ILLNESS by depicting a physical symptom of fear, while example (27) from my corpus,

(27) Stojish na ostonovke [...], a sama skhodish s uma ot strakha – plachet Serëzhka odin v zakrytoj kvartire ili eshchë net?

(You are standing at the bus stop [...], and you are going crazy with fear – is Seryozhka crying alone in the locked apartment or not yet?),

refers to a mental problem. However, both examples describe a very intense level of fear.

Example (28),

(28) Ne ostavljajte rebënka naedine s ego strakhami, i popytajtes’ sovместnymi usilijami sdelat’ ego uchëbu v shkole prijatnoj i plodotvornoj

[‘Do not leave the child alone with his fears and try to work together to make his schooling (= studies at school) pleasant and fruitful’],

instantiates the metaphor FEAR IS A (BAD) COMPANION, which is not identified in Kövecses’s (1990, 2000) studies, probably because it is not part of the English concept of fear.

4. The role of context in the meaning construction of the metonymies and metaphors in my corpora

The discussion above has shown that context (single words, phrases or whole sentences) plays a part in meaning construction. There is no real practical or pragmatic sense to look at the meanings of words out of context, since in communication (either written or oral) we practically never use words alone. A single word or short phrase may provide a context for another word or phrase. For example, the sentence *Mary has turned pale* may refer to Mary's physical condition. But if we add *with fear* to the sentence, we know that the emotion *fear* is the cause of Mary's change of skin colour. The addition of the prepositional phrase *with fear* puts Mary's change of skin colour in the context of fear and, by doing so, enables us to understand the example as an instantiation of the metonymy CHANGE OF SKIN COLOUR STANDS FOR FEAR.

Combinations of words like *shrink in horror*, *shake with fear*, *drozhat' ot strakha* ['shake with fear'] may be viewed as various instantiations of the metonymy PHYSICAL AGITATION STANDS FOR FEAR.

Kövecses's (2015) analysis of Richie's (2004) example of the ANCHOR metaphor (*My wife is an anchor*) shows that context may serve as a means of disambiguating an otherwise ambiguous metaphor. In other words, disambiguation leads to two different meanings of the same metaphorical expression. In my corpus, however, examples like (29) *serdce oborvalos'* ['the heart sank'], (30) *serdce v pjatki ushlo* ['the heart is gone to the heel'] and (31) *dusha v pajtki ushla* ['the soul is gone to the heel'] show that the three expressions combining different words instantiate the metaphor FEAR IS THE HEART DOWN, thus establishing the same situation (or a very similar situation), in which the heart is conceptualized as losing its normal position. Examples (30) and (31) also show that the terms *serdce* and *dusha* (heart and soul) are interchangeable in the context, although they are not identical in meaning, since *serdce* denotes the body organ, while *dusha* refers to a "person's spiritual, moral, and emotional core and as an internal theatre where a person's moral and emotional life goes on" (Wierzbicka 1997: 3), in other words, the latter denotes a central and specific concept in the Russian culture and language. Both *serdce* and *dusha* are understood as the seat of emotion by speakers of Russian, that is, they both may be used to describe fear.

5. Conclusion

Based on the literature I have studied and the analysis of my corpora, I have found that context is a very important factor in all meaning making. The role of the linguistic context is to allow precise interpretation of what has been communicated by both literal and figurative expressions (metaphors and metonymies); it gives information about the conceptual content signalled by individual words, it helps to disambiguate ambiguous metaphorical expressions, by making a difference between literal, metonymical and metaphorical meanings of expressions and also by highlighting culture-specific peculiarities in the use of certain words and concepts within and across languages.

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