

Everything You Need to Know About Transferring Metaphorical Ducks

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In this article, Agathe Lancrenon tests some of her friends' abilities to deduce the meaning of five French phrases translated into English. She examines how they go about guessing the meaning of the phrases by drawing on their prior knowledge and transferring their linguistic skills. The readers are also invited to play along and study their own cognitive processes, so . . . Allons-y*! (* *Let's go!*)

Imagine the following situation: you're taking a language class, let's say French (because I'm biased like that) and one day you come across an interesting phrase that you don't quite understand. So, being the curious, enthusiastic person that you are, you raise your hand and ask the instructor if they could help you translate it. But to your dismay, the only answer that you get is a slightly embarrassed: "Oh, err, well, you see, it doesn't translate well in English..."

So you use another phrase instead, but you can *feel*, somehow, that it doesn't really fit. It's not *exactly* the same thing, and you feel a little betrayed. But before you decide to climb on your desk, point at your teacher and cry out heroically: "You liar! You said you were bilingual!" . . . let's just take a step back.

Have you thought about why that phrase couldn't be translated into your own language?

As if grammar rules and verb conjugations and vocabulary lists weren't hard enough to memorize when you're learning a new language, it's also important to understand that the whole thinking process in that other culture may be completely different from yours. Famous French philosopher Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am," but he might have just as well said "I *speak*, therefore I am."

To give you a little bit of background, I am a French graduate student at Illinois State University. Although I am far from being an expert in linguistics or cultural studies, I find these subjects fascinating (everybody needs a hobby, right?). Most of what I know about this comes from personal experience as an international student rather than from actual research, but I have had many opportunities to observe those little cultural differences between French and American people that are sometimes so cute, so hilarious, or so very weird.

And, as a language enthusiast, I've always been very interested in how people's thoughts are shaped by the way they speak. Our native language, and the additional languages that we may know, provide a frame which structures our worldview. Studying how these different languages influence our thinking was the main goal I set out to explore when I started writing this article, and because I am not a professional writer or researcher, I wanted to give it a little entertaining twist.

Linguistic diversity is an important factor to recognize in our identity: we all carry many different influences in our speech without even realizing it. Even monolingual speakers, that is to say people who "only" know their native language, are influenced by their experiences, their encounters, their region or city of origin, etc. Someone from Boston does not speak the same way as someone from Los Angeles or Chicago or Austin, and accent is only one part of it: they also have different cultural references, vocabulary and typical expressions, and this all shapes their interactions. Becoming aware of these influences can help us understand our own writing practices better, and make us more successful in different communicative situations. It is also interesting to learn more about our linguistic heritage and how other people may have thinking processes that are different from ours because of that.

You have probably encountered one of those situations before, when you felt a sense of disconnect between what was meant and what was understood. For example, one of your friends may have used a slang word that you were not familiar with and you misunderstood what they were saying, or, you know, that annoying little moment when you cannot find the word you are looking for and have to resort to another one, but it is not exactly what you meant.

It is the same, and maybe even more obvious, with multilingual speakers—that is, people who know more than one language. As an "L2 speaker of English," which is a term used in fields such as linguistics and education to indicate that English is my second language, I can vouch for that. I have often found myself frustrated when I did not understand an idea in English, not just because I did not know the words but because the connotations, grammar structure, or cultural references were unfamiliar to me.

For instance, I remember when I went to Canada for the first time, having never traveled before, and someone I just met said "Nice to meet

you.” I thought that was a very kind thing to say to a stranger! After all, she did not know me very well, but it seemed like she was happy to have crossed paths with me... right? So I answered “Thank you,” because I thought, again, that it was just a very nice thing to say. I only realized a bit later that it is actually a common greeting, and that the socially expected response is to return the favor: “Thanks, *nice to meet you too!*” But at that time, I was lacking that knowledge: even though I understood the words perfectly, I did not understand *what they meant*.

So, to learn more about how this all works, I wanted to do an experiment where I would study how non-French speakers read French expressions (translated literally). I decided to, first, ask people to look at foreign expressions and, secondly, observe how they went about deciphering them. I did not want to evaluate the success of their interpretations, but rather what knowledge and skills they had that could help them understand new information, and what cognitive activities they engaged in to draw on them.

I wondered what research method would be effective in order to collect data and analyze the results. I considered interviewing people directly, but I was not sure how detailed and thought-through their answers would be. I wanted them to take time to reflect on their own processes rather than only answer spontaneously in a face-to-face interview. So I decided to design online surveys instead, and I created two different questionnaires to that end.

The first questionnaire was aimed both at native French speakers (either from France or from other French-speaking areas in the world, such as Quebec, Belgium, or Switzerland) and speakers of French as a second language—or L2 speakers. I received answers from twenty-two people, including nine French people, one native speaker from Quebec, and twelve speakers of French as a second language, all of which were Americans from various states.

The goal of that survey was to collect a bank of idiomatic expressions that were both typically French and unfamiliar to non-French speakers at the same time. By “typically French,” I mean sayings that are well-known and used in everyday speech in France, so they can be considered representative of certain aspects of French culture. Additionally, since I had only received one answer from a native speaker from Quebec, I decided to focus on sayings from France only.

My main question, after inquiring about the cultural and linguistic background of the person, was: “Do you know some French sayings that are typical of your country, region or city? Or to a country, region or city where you have spent some time? (For example, sayings that you find interesting, amusing, strange, untranslatable...)” People were eager to share their favorite expressions, either because, as native speakers, they were proud of the diversity and individuality of their language or because, as French learners, they were

amused or intrigued by some of the cultural specificities of the language. In total, I collected more than sixty expressions. Some of them were even completely unknown to me, because they were from Quebec, Louisiana or even remote French regions I'm not familiar with. But I was very happy with these first results and decided that I needed to narrow down the list.

To choose which expressions I would use, I decided to only focus on sayings that involved metaphors. One example in English would be: "It's raining cats and dogs." Because it is an entire sentence with a metaphorical meaning that L2 speakers may not be familiar with, it is both complete enough not to require too much context and opaque enough for the meaning not to be too obvious at first sight. This eliminated a lot of expressions from my original list: words derived from creole, dialects and variants of French (e.g., French Canadian) were abandoned, mostly because they did not correspond to my requirement and because I did not feel I was familiar enough with these expressions to be able to do them justice in this article.

In the end, I selected five of these metaphorical sayings:

1. J'ai un chat dans la gorge.
2. Elle a donné sa langue au chat.
3. Ça ne casse pas trois pattes à un canard.
4. Il noie le poisson.
5. Ça m'a mis la puce à l'oreille.

I then (roughly) translated them into English, choosing a very literal translation rather than an interpretation. These are the five sayings I ended up with:

1. I have a cat in my throat.
2. She gave her tongue to the cat.
3. It won't break the three legs of a duck. (This one was a little harder to translate, so it may not make much sense grammatically, but I hope it works well enough for the purpose of this experiment.)
4. He's drowning the fish.
5. It brought a flea to my ear.

(And as you can see, I also chose an animal theme, but that was just for the fun of it...)

My next step was to ask non-speakers of French to see how they would interpret these sayings based on their own linguistic experience. To that end,

I designed a second questionnaire, this time addressed to people who either did not speak French at all or had a limited level of French knowledge. I thought it would be interesting to include the latter category because having some basic knowledge of French might provide different linguistic resources to draw on in the interpretative process, but being a fluent French speaker would defeat the purpose completely since these speakers would probably understand the meaning of the metaphors straight away. So, in asking people to answer the survey, I specified that people should not have more than a beginner's level of French to take it.

For each French saying translated in English, I asked the questions below with the following instructions: “When analyzing this saying, please give a detailed account of your thought process. Here are some questions that might help you (but don't feel limited to these):

1. How do you understand this saying? (Explain briefly.)
2. What is the first idea or image that came to your mind?
3. What previous knowledge of your native language and culture did you draw on?
4. What previous knowledge of other languages and cultures did you draw on?
5. If applicable, what other connections did you make?
6. If applicable, what did you find challenging and why?
7. On a scale from 1 to 5, how sure are you that you understand the meaning of this saying?

At this point, feel free to test yourself, too! What expressions can you understand? And how did you get to that point? Of course, I'm going to give you the answers later on, but for now, “let's get back to our sheep” (yes, this is another French expression, but I bet you can get this one!).

I included many different sub-questions in order to collect answers that were as detailed as possible, but I tried not to guide the answers too much. In total, I received seven answers from speakers with various linguistic backgrounds. I am not interested in detailing the particular languages that each survey taker speaks, but rather how those languages informed their reasoning.

This idea of drawing on prior knowledge and applying it to an unfamiliar subject in order to acquire new information, knowledge, or skills is called **transfer**. The ISU Writing Program website defines transfer as: “[a] critical component of learning [and a] process by which students engage in a learning activity and then utilize that learning in new situations or applications.” The

Writing Program focuses particularly on transfer in pedagogy, but transfer occurs in every area of our lives, whether professional, academic or personal.

For example, if you're used to driving your car to work every day, you may also feel comfortable enough with the idea of driving a van to help your friend move. This happens because you know vans work in similar ways to cars, so you can use your car-driving skills, maybe tweak them a little through observation, trial and error, and drive a slightly bigger vehicle. This is called **low-road transfer**, because you can apply this knowledge instinctively and do not need to actively learn a completely new skill.

However, if you wanted to drive a train, you would need more specialized training, obviously, because the way a train works is very different—but you might still be able to recognize some common features of “vehicle-handling.” This is called **high-road transfer**: it is a conscious process that you actively engage in. However, both processes are equally important and the terms “low-road” and “high-road” do not refer to some kind of hierarchy, they just mean that one operates on a more conscious level than the other.

What I was interested in researching during this experiment was how much low-road and high-road transfer occurred when people try to understand unfamiliar figures of speech. Because we are not necessarily aware of this process when we research and learn new things, it was important that I phrase my questions so that even people unfamiliar with the idea of transfer would give me a detailed account of their reasoning. This is why I included so many sub-questions in my questionnaire.

So let's analyze the data (this is the fun part of the experiment!). Out of seven people and five different expressions, here is how well people understood the phrases:

	Not understood	Vague/general idea	Understood
I have a cat in my throat.	0	2	5
She gave her tongue to the cat.	3	4	0
It won't break the three legs of a duck.	4	2	1
He's drowning the fish.	4	3	0
It brought a flea to my ear.	2	2	3

Given that I am the sole judge of the questionnaire-takers' success, these results may seem a little subjective, because it is true that I did not use very scientific criteria to decide what was "well understood" or not. However, I believe that this chart can give us a general idea of the mixed responses I received for the questionnaire.

Let's examine the first saying, "I have a cat in my throat." I expected people familiar with the saying "I have a frog in my throat" to be able to recognize a similar pattern—the only difference being the animal referred to. Indeed, five people out of seven explicitly used their knowledge of that saying to decide that the French metaphor must mean something at least similar, if not exactly the same. This was an easily recognizable grammatical structure, and I included it to see whether people would be thrown off by it or rather confident about their answer; as the results show, they were successful.

What the phrase really means: I have something stuck in my throat, I have a raspy throat.

Additionally, what I had not anticipated was that two people also compared this saying to the expression "Cat got your tongue?" I found this interesting because I expected them to make that connection with the second saying, "She gave her tongue to the cat," and not necessarily with this one. So let's examine this last saying now and see how we can compare the two. Although both related to cats, they are quite different...

Indeed, although the saying "She gave her tongue to the cat" may be less grammatically recognizable, I expected the vocabulary to be a helpful hint, because the terms "cat" and "tongue" are also associated in English in the saying: "Cat got your tongue?" This one is a little more different from the French version however, because although it employs similar words and ideas, it does not mean exactly the same thing. But even though no one understood it perfectly, four people did pick up on these clues and came quite close to the meaning of the sentence.

These analyses generally seemed to indicate that, when drawing on prior language knowledge, people can use several tactics. One is to associate similar grammar structures, which essentially means seeing the sentence as a pattern that can be reproduced in either language. Another tactic is to use vocabulary networks to infer meaning. What I mean by this is that people did not only pick up on single words (like "cat" and "tongue"), which would be too general to be helpful, but they also recognized word associations. Because these associations are not that common in everyday language, they could try to infer the meaning of the sentence based on the usual context that they are used in.

One other tactic that three people mention using was drawing on connotations and figurative meanings. For example, one person thought it

indicated that the subject was “at a loss for words,” another that their throat was “locked up” either literally or metaphorically (“one [might be] holding back information”), and the third one that the subject was “being silent for lack of words. . . or fear.” In most English-speaking cultures, having something in your throat implies that your ability to speak is impaired, whether it is about physical speech or about being silenced, unheard. Consequently, by assuming that these connections are also made in French culture, the underlying meaning of the saying may appear clearer.

What this phrase really means: I can’t guess, so I give up (usually in the context of playing a guessing game).

Now that we’ve dealt with some of the seemingly easier sayings, this leads me to some of the more complex ones that I chose. By “complex,” I mean that neither the grammar nor the vocabulary alone would be sufficient to extrapolate the meaning of the sentence, and that the connotations in English may not correspond to the French ones.

Let’s start with “It won’t break the three legs of a duck.” What to make of this sentence? One person did understand it, apparently easily enough, but four people were very confused by it. So where does this difference come from? Well, the people who had the most difficulty understanding it explained that they were confused by the image of a three-legged duck: is it supposed to be funny? Does it have crutches? Or drumsticks? There are no direct, available referents in English (that I know of) that associate these three ideas: a duck, three legs, and broken legs. So drawing on vocabulary or grammar would not be very helpful in this case.

What of the figurative meaning, then? All respondents drew on logic at first: since a duck cannot have three legs, the saying is therefore nonsensical. Then, they all proceeded to think about what this nonsense can be associated with: irrelevant information, humor, exaggeration, incompetence of the subject, harmlessness, reassurance. . . Most of these ideas seemed to imply that a three-legged duck (a) was not much of a threatening figure and (b) must have something to do with some sort of physically impaired or clumsy subject. What they did agree on is that since any action resulting in hurting a duck’s three legs was impossible, then it was either an exaggeration of the action itself or of its consequences.

Without context, it was indeed difficult to interpret, but some people drew connections with the English sayings: “Killing two birds with one stone” and “It won’t be the end of the world.” Here are some reasons I can think of about why such connections were made: “Killing two birds with one stone” involves similar ideas, like animals/birds (vocabulary), killing/hurting (vocabulary and connotation), and numbers (vocabulary), whereas “It won’t

be the end of the world” shows similar grammar (structure). Again, we can observe that the three tactics mentioned earlier were used: word associations, grammatical structures and figurative meanings (or connotation).

Finally, the only person who understood the saying perfectly explained it as follows: “A duck only has two legs, so if it won’t break three, then it has to be talking about an extreme. . . My first thought was, ‘it’s strong,’ but then that seemed to make no sense, so it went with ‘really easy’ instead.” Apparently, they only used logic—perhaps the metaphorical meaning was clear to them from the beginning because they used low-road, unconscious transfer.

What the phrase really means: It’s easy.

Did you think it really was easy? Well, let’s see how you fare with the next saying, then. . . Let’s move on to “He’s drowning the fish.”

This time, four people did not understand it, and three only had a general idea of what it meant, but no one guessed the exact meaning. Here again, people started by using logic first: fish do not drown, therefore it is either an exaggeration or irony (or both). This means that they went straight for the figurative meaning of the sentence. However, they also drew on other associations of ideas: they all agreed that it had a negative connotation, due to the idea of drowning.

(Curiously, in the previous example, everyone concluded that the saying was rather positive, although the duck’s legs got broken in the process: I think this might be due to the fact that a duck is usually considered a funny, harmless animal in Western culture, while fish do not often cause very emotional responses. . .)

The idea of irony also came through grammar and word associations with other English sayings such as “Beating a dead horse” and “Fighting fire with fire.” First, “Beating a dead horse” uses similar word associations with the death of an animal (which sounds pretty horrible, but it is all very metaphorical of course!). Then, both expressions use exaggeration, either as nonsense (beating an already dead horse) or as repetition (using an element as a weapon against itself). Drowning a fish would require both these senses of exaggeration, and therefore the connection between these three sayings is made clear through, again, the grammar, the vocabulary, and most importantly, the connotations.

What the phrase really means: He’s trying to change the conversation, to avoid the subject, by complicating the situation (in the context of someone having been caught doing something bad, or trying not to get caught).

How did you do this time? I can feel you're starting to get the hang of it, so let's analyze the last saying, "It brought a flea to my ear."

This one was also confusing: four people got the general idea, and three did not understand it at all. One thing that I did not expect is that people were not sure about whether this sentence has a positive or negative connotation. They explained it as follows: using the ideas that Western culture traditionally associates with fleas, we can say that they are either (a) small, tiny, discrete (which brings to mind ideas of cuteness, harmlessness or secrets) and (b) unpleasant, dirty, disgusting. This initial jump to connotation seems to indicate that there were no clues related to grammar or vocabulary that could help our survey-takers. So let's see what else they inferred . . .

Because they could not decide whether the flea had a positive or a negative role in this saying, they also could not decide how its action (jumping to one's ear) was perceived. The presence of the ear, figuratively linked to someone's attention, indicated that the flea represented an idea or a piece of information—this was inferred through both logic and connotation/metaphorical meaning. Therefore, they argued that the flea was either tickling someone's ear and arousing their curiosity, or annoying the owner of that ear (for example by bringing unpleasant news or saying something distasteful).

The size of the flea was also significant: it implies discretion, secretiveness and easily-overlooked information. However, the fact that it jumped to someone's ear symbolizes its importance. It was compared to the saying "A little bird told me," which connects with the idea of a small, message-bringer animal. Here, vocabulary and connotation were used as tactics to relate the saying to prior cultural knowledge. In the same vein, one person mentioned Pinocchio's friend Jiminy Cricket as an associated idea, which I found really funny and quite relevant.

So, even though no one could guess the exact meaning of the saying without any context, I would say that they did get as much as they could of the original metaphor and used all three tactics successfully.

What it really means: It got me suspicious . . . (Because I noticed a small detail or clue.)

So here we go . . . How many sayings did you get out of these five? Did you play Sherlock Holmes and draw on your own linguistic knowledge? I've always found these little cultural nuggets really funny, and it makes you think about your own language in a different light, doesn't it?

Before I started this article, I expected to find out more about how people transfer their language knowledge and skills in order to understand unfamiliar phrases, especially when the metaphorical meaning is not obvious. I thought I would analyze how people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds draw on their own experience to infer meaning, but there were two things I did not anticipate.

First, I did not think about how very different people's linguistic experiences were, and how much that would influence their answers. It would take a lot more study to compare how one's language influences their thinking about other languages. Fortunately for this experiment, I think, most of the people who answered my questionnaire shared similar backgrounds in that they were mostly native English speakers, so they could rely on similar knowledge as far as their native language was concerned and that helped me naturally narrow down my focus. But it would be fascinating to see how people from other cultures would interpret these sayings! Would a Japanese or Argentinian person use the same resources and find the same results?

The second thing I did not expect was to find a pattern of tactics that people would use in transfer. The first tactic is to rely on similar grammatical structures, that is, either the sentences are constructed similarly or they use similar figures of speech (e.g. exaggeration, repetition, etc.). The second tactic is to use vocabulary, for example by drawing on cognates, common themes and imagery, or recognizable patterns of word associations. The third tactic is to use one's knowledge of figurative and metaphorical meanings, through connotation, metonymy or value judgment. Additionally, according to the individual's knowledge and preferences, they can achieve transfer by using either of these tactics independently, in whatever order they choose, or all three simultaneously. It is also important to mention that during this process, coherence is key in order to create meaning successfully and, to that end, logic remains the basis of all reasoning.

I am not a professional linguist, and I am pretty sure this has been studied by more qualified researchers than yours truly, but coming to these results by myself was quite enjoyable and satisfying. I now know that I can do research, analyze results and draw conclusions like a real goggled, white-coated, wild-haired scientist.

So, next time you encounter a phrase that you don't understand, you know how to go about it! And if you still can't, just give your tongue to the cat . . . After all, it won't break a duck's three legs!

Works Cited

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