The power of metaphors in the educational discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse metaphors of power present in the educational discourse, with specific emphasis on the Romanian educational landscape. The research involved questionnaires and interviews with students preparing to become teachers, teacher trainees enrolled on the teacher education module at the University of Alba Iulia, Romania, with students of other disciplines and with beginning teachers. The insights into the educational discourse and the way in which different metaphors, used almost unawares by the different discourse participants have provided us with a deeper understanding of how our future, our career path, attitudes and ideals are shaped by the way in which teachers talk to us.

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1. Introduction

Education lies at the top of both UNESCO and the European Commission agendas. In particular, the education of teachers is considered as one of the most important priorities nowadays. Besides the traditional sound subject knowledge that we used to need in the past in order to achieve success in life, the modern citizen needs to be equipped with far more other qualities: communication and cooperation skills, problem solving abilities, creative and critical thinking, and positive attitudes towards learning throughout one's life. We all recognize the importance of teacher education, and we acknowledge teachers' role as society catalysts and vectors. That is why we need to identify disfunctionalities in the educational systems and try to remedy them as much as possible.

Starting from the initial teacher-training period, being strongly influenced by their personal experience as a pupil, respectively, as a student, the future teachers value to an almost absolute extent, the merits of the power exercised by the teacher in relation to the learner. Marked by these deeply engrained preconceived ideas, little resistant to the 'allure of power', beginning teachers let themselves carried away by the complex of superiority. This is one of the most interesting and subtle aspects of the individual constructs of the 'didactic personality'. Especially at the beginning of their careers, young teachers display a totally unexpected rigidity and lack of creative thinking, most often resorting to the power invested in them by the cathedra, and the ensuing power distance, which raises questions as to the effectiveness of our psycho-pedagogic training during the pre-service teacher education programmes. Our study is part of a larger body of research into teacher trainees' preconceptions of intercultural education in Romania (Iordachescu, 2013).

Indeed, the teacher 'calls the shots', he/she makes the decisions as to what and when he teaches, what educational objectives he has, what contents he uses, and 'quid prodest', he chooses almost discretionarily and unidirectionally his/her teaching methodology, and most particularly, how and to which end he/she designs, applies and interprets evaluation.

The advantage of age, of extended experience, of their cultural insights, of the decision-making prerogatives, crosscuts all the components of the educational system and is enhanced and emphasised by other elements of the institutional environment: the teacher's desk is placed on a pedestal or podium in most of the classrooms in Romanian schools; teachers have separate and secured entrance into schols, their own staircase, etc.

2. Literature Review

Metaphors, together with metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, are regarded as a master trope, "a figure of speech that defines a relationship between terms" (Sapir, 1977; as cited in Nelson & Hitchon, 1999). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) metaphors represent the understanding of one concept in terms of another, therefore abstractions, such as feelings or emotions, are typically structured through physical experiences. By and large, self-understanding represents the "search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives... The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself" (1980).

Yet, it is important for us to understand how metaphors used in a classroom setting can affect the subsequent development of children and how their learning processes can be affected. According to Vygotsky (1962), understanding metaphors tallies with "ad hoc" concepts or mental spaces activated in discourse: "The relation of thought to word is not just a thing, but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process, the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as development. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relationship between things". Thus, metaphor can effect shared understanding of our own existence, and hence, metaphors in educational discourse can lead to the shaping, construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of children's' understanding and

conceptualisation of the world. Moreover, according to Roschelle (1992), developmental complexification of metaphors can occur over quite a short period of time as concerns a particular concept. The cognitive role of metaphor towards conceptualisation extends beyond the mere structuring of concepts, to the process of conceptual restructuring, the recourse to analogy in problem-solving or facilitating recall of information.

In order to understand the relationship between teacher and students, we need to first understand the way in which both teachers and students conceive themselves and the other. According to Munby (1986, as cited in Thornbury, 1991) "one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers' thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves". In a study by Oxford, et al. (1998) teachers' metaphors in L2 teaching were clustered into a typology centred on four perspectives of teaching:

a) Social order: for example, teacher as manufacturer, teacher as competitor;

b) Cultural transmission: for example, teacher as conduit, teacher as repeater;

c) Learner-centred growth: for example, teacher as nurturer, teacher as lover, teacher as scaffolder, teacher as entertainer; and

d) Social reform: for example, teacher as acceptor, teacher as learning partner.

However, given the cultural differences between the British and/or American society and the Romanian one, where the power distance index is higher, these sets of metaphors will, by necessity, change.

3. Research Methodology

The aim of this paper is to identify instances of the exercise of power in the discourse revolving around the educational space. We will analyse the metaphors of power that are frequent in the educational discourse, and we will try to identify causes and effects of such linguistic devices. The research involved questionnaires and interviews with pre-service teachers enrolled on the teacher education programme at the University of Alba Iulia, Romania. The approach is a multidimensional one, as it involves several aspects: pedagogy/didactics; discourse analysis, psychoanalysis and semantics. The strongly delineated power distance between teachers and students can be analysed from all the perspectives mentioned above.

4. Results and Interpretation

The results of the investigation revealed that the metaphors used by teachers in their discourse can dramatically affect their subsequent development, can give the direction of their future career, and forever instill love or hatred for a certain subject.

The teaching act, conceived as manipulation, or even as taming of the learner, the pre-eminence of teachers' own means of getting listened to and of 'subduing', turns the educator into the absolute master of the above mentioned relation. The feeling of almightiness, more or less explicit in the relationship teacher – student is transposed into disproportionate rapports in exerting the roles and functions of the teacher. The teachers' self-centeredness is blatantly manifest in their focus on own convictions and representations, in the self-sufficiency and scientific and professional narcissism, in positioning themselves against contents to the detriment of objectives, to educational desiderata, arbitrarily designed to the detriment of the pupils' real learning needs. On the other hand, we are faced with the overt and/or subliminal histrionics of teachers' didactic and non-didactic behaviours, characterised by a model of megalomania (in fantasy and/or in real behaviour), an overwhelming need for admiration/self-admiration, and more than often, a sheer lack of empathy towards the others.

The process of teachers' professional development is carried out along a continuum, starting with initial teacher training and ending with retirement from the profession. However, apart from three major professional examinations, and some training courses that some teachers embark upon on a voluntary basis, most of the times for advancement purposes or better payment, there is little, if any, specialist training for psycho-pedagogic competences development.

In the first stage, that of initial teacher training, would-be teachers get acquainted with specialised knowledge and competences pertaining to pedagogy and didactics. In Romania, this stage still coincides with the psycho-pedagogic modules I and II, concurrent with the bachelor and MA degree studies. Unfortunately, these two modules contain no courses in intercultural education, which affects trainees' ability to cope with the multifariousness of problems that they might encounter as beginning teachers, especially if they set out in their career in a remote village, with mixed-ability and mixed-age groups of students, most of them of different ethnic or race backgrounds (Hungarians, Roma, etc.)

Faced with their first professional experiences, the now beginning teachers, the formerly enthusiastic, idealistic and perfectionist students, feel acutely a professional identity crisis. The short circuit between the theory learned in university and the school reality may very quickly end up in a feeling of rejection and awkwardness in the system.

In a society still dominated by prejudice of all kinds (race, sex, even religion), the young teacher finds himself in an embarrassment of choice over his philosophy of teaching, and in the process of finding his own teaching mantra, he would most often fall prey to deeply engrained prejudgment and stereotypes over the social role of the teacher.

The issue of intercultural education is at the core of Romanian teacher education and the question that remains is: How do we position ourselves, as a national educational system in relation to this tendency of acceptance and valuing of diversity, to this necessity of differentiating the psycho-educational intervention to the verge of individualising and personalising it, within an educational system, profoundly influenced by its collective thought, rather encourages both opportunism and obedience, conformity, abiding by the norm, as well as, to an equal extent, cunning, superficiality, alongside approaches that iterate the primacy of 'order and discipline'?

How else can we raise the question of interculturality in a system that cherishes the educational merits of punishment ("chastisement is heavenly" – a biblical precept: "Chasten thy son while there is hope and let not thy soul spare for his crying." – Pr 18:18; 'when mother hits you, you will grow', etc.) or of the attitude of neutrality, or at the most of benevolence, even towards your own child ("do not kiss your baby unless it's asleep").

Parents who are ashamed to tell their own children that they love them will put in turn pressure on educators to realize 'high-standard education'. They change didactic principles, absurdly and egocentrically meddle with the life of the class/group which their children are part of, only to push them forward in front of the others, to fabricate advantages for them and to make them feel special and inimitable.

It is still psychoanalysis that could provide interesting explanations concerning this issue, if we are to take into consideration this attitude as a way of overcompensation of the frustrations that these teachers have developed as a result of the ever increasing debasing perceptions of the teacher's socio-professional status nurtured by the public opinion. On the other hand, teachers themselves consider the prospective future teaching career as a fall-back solution, a 'bad weather' umbrella, a temporary solution, while waiting for the golden job in store for them.

Future teachers are thus inoculated from the collective thought the idea which will set in their own mentality that teachers are part of a social professional category devoid of qualities and perspectives, with a marginal role and status, possessing an ever decreasing scientific and psycho-pedagogic training (nowadays teachers are 'weaker' than our 'good old times teachers'), without real prospects in a different profession ('only the weakest graduates end up as teachers'), mainly inactive and lacking in

initiatives ('teachers do almost nothing in class, 'most of the time they're on holiday, just like pupils'), unjustifiably consuming undeserved resources as opposed to minimal results ('teachers produce nothing, they only eat up resources').

Teachers will internalise so deeply these debasing social labels that they will bear in the form of painful and frustration-generating stigmata. In time, cathartic liberation from these frustrations represents the very exercise of power and dominance mentioned above over the pupil, the 'culprit', a representative of the society that continually blamed and disavowed him, the one 'responsible' for his predicament. The sad truth is however, that in reality, slowly, but steadily, the teacher ends up behaving in accordance with these 'labels'.

Several metaphorical clusters may be identified from the responses of the students and teachers:

a) the teacher as master:

"My subject is the most important one!" "You just do as I say – because I say so!" "You only have to learn from my course book / lecture notes!" – other sources are unreliable." "You made me angry – so I'll give you a test!" "I have to be tough with my students, otherwise I'll lose face and control in front of them." "I prefer subdued, not so smart pupils to more intelligent and unruly ones."

b) the teacher as despot/dictator:

"You are stupid!", "You callous ones", "You're so rude", "dumbo's", "You'd better shut up if you don't know the answer", "you're wrong!"; "You will never pass the school leaving exam in mathematics! (Guess what – we almost all passed it!)"; "going to university is useless", "stop eating, or you'll never be able to get through that door", "I can't wait getting rid of you", "stop laughing like a fool!', "You're good-for-nothing!", "If you don't learn, the devil's mother will take you all!", "If you become a teacher, the kids will eat you up!", "you read in English like a shoe!", "I'm sick of you! I don't want to be your form teacher anymore!" "I can't stand you!", "When you're mind breeds offspring, let me know!" "Take a look at your colleague! Why can't you do the same? How come he/she can and you cannot?", "No, not you, let your colleague do this. You can't." "Are you stupid or you just don't understand?", "You disappoint me!", "I expected more from your part!", "You are out of this world!", "You're a shame for this team!", "What a blockhead you are!", You prepared for today as much as a peanut!", "If you're such a lazybones, you'd better stay at home!", "Stop trying, you'll never make it!"

c) the teacher as moral support:

"Well done, good grades! / good attendance!", "you've got talent, keep on writing!", "Bravo, see you can do it, keep up the good work!", "Congratulations!, you're a talented pupil!", "You're the only pupil who has prepared well for today!", "Don't worry, you'll do better next time!", "If you're not prepared for today, you can answer next time!", "You've done the best paper today!", "You're doing just fine!", "Today you only got a 4, next time you'll answer for a 10!", "Believe in yourself and you'll make it!", "You lost a battle, not the war!",

d) the teacher as learning partner:

"I'm proud of you!", "We'll show them all how good we are!", "I will be by your side, no matter what!", "This is just a great idea, I haven't thought about it myself!"

5. Conclusions and Interpretation

Teacher trainees, starting with their pre-service teacher-training programme should be made aware of the power of words used in the classroom. In particular, such figurative language, filled with metaphors, similes, metonymies, etc., can at times become dangerous for the further development of the learners. Therefore, teacher educators have to intersperse their disciplines with clear awareness raising strategies in order to train future teachers as to the importance of power metaphors in the classroom. To our surprise, the metaphor of the teacher as despot/dictator was prevalent in almost all

the cases of the subjects interviewed. Every single subject remembered one such deprecating remark, either to him/her or to the other members of the class. It was less often found that people remembered encouraging/stimulating remarks that helped them along in their learning experiences.

Acknowledgements

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