Metaphor Interpretation and Cultural Linguistics

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Abstract

Metaphor use is characterised by conceptual variation that can be explained with reference to culture-specific discourse traditions. Cognitively oriented metaphor analyses that are interested in cultural relativity have so far concentrated mainly on the production side of metaphors and their misunderstanding by ESL learners. This study, by contrast, focuses on variation in *metaphor interpretation* across groups of ESL/EFL users from 31 cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Its data consist of a questionnaire survey, administered in 10 countries, which gave students the task of applying the metaphor of the "body politic" to one's home nation. The results show systematic variation between four interpretation models for this metaphor, i.e. NATION AS GEOBODY, NATION AS FUNCTIONAL WHOLE, NATION AS PART OF SELF and NATION AS PART OF INTERNATIONAL/GLOBAL STRUCTURE, as well as some evidence of polemical and/or political elaboration. The two main versions, i.e. NATION AS GEOBODY and NATION AS FUNCTIONAL WHOLE, were represented across all cohorts but exhibited opposite frequency patterns across Chinese v. Western cohorts, with the former favouring GEOBODY-based, the latter functional interpretations. This finding provides evidence of culture-specific variation in metaphor interpretation (as well as in metaphor production), specifically with regard to the frequency and distribution patterns of source concepts. Metaphor interpretation analysis can thus contribute to a cognitive metaphor analysis in general and especially to the "cultural linguistics" approach to metaphor.

Keywords: body politic, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, discourse, English as Second Language/as Lingua Franca, interpretation, metaphor, metonymy, variation

1. Introduction

The cultural dimension of metaphor has been a central issue in cognitive metaphor study and anthropological linguistics, with a particular emphasis on identifying and explaining

cross-cultural variation (Díaz Vera, 2014; Goddard, 1996; Idström & Piirainen, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003; Kövecses, 2005; Musolff et al., 2014; Sahlins, 1981; Sharifian, 2014, 2015; Sharifian et al., 2008; Yu, 2003, 2008, 2015). The theoretical challenge posed by culture-specific variation of metaphors has its roots in their nature as both conceptual and embodied phenomena. Bodily experiences form the universal basis of our conceptual systems, including their metaphorical mappings (Gibbs, 2005; Johnson, 1987), but the conceptual systems in themselves are culturally acquired, transmitted and mediated. Even though many pre-modern cultures, their knowledge systems and characteristic metaphors are nowadays being marginalized by a globalized diffuse 'Western' culture (Longmailai & Rabha, 2012; Rice, 2012; Shogimen, 2008), diverse cultural backgrounds are still being reflected and reinforced in contrastive metaphorical lexis, grammar and discourse patterns that are currently in use. For instance, in Chinese and English the metaphor SOCIAL IDENTITY-AS-FACE involves diverse, culturally motivated conceptual architectures (Jia, 1997; Yu, 2008); the text-deictic organisation of narratives told in the "Siroi" language of Papua New Guinea has been shown to be motivated by the speakers' traditional environment (van Kleef & van Kleef, 2012); and ANGER/EMOTION metaphors in English can be linked to the "four humours" theory, which influenced Western medical thought for more than a millennium (Geeraerts & Grondelaers, 1995; Kövecses, 1995).

Further evidence of cross-cultural variation in figurative language use and reception has been assembled in research on English-as-Lingua Franca (ELF) and English-as-L2 (ESL) uses: it revealed a substantial degree of miscommunication in early and/or fossilised acquisition stages, due to wrongly understood figurative language use (Littlemore et al., 2011; MacArthur et al., 2013; Nacey, 2013; Philip, 2010; Piquer-Piriz, 2010; Wang & Dowker, 2010). These findings may seem less important with regard to the understanding of conventional metaphors in advanced L2 acquisition, whose participants are likely to have relatively good lexical and pragmatic L2 competence and, if misunderstandings occur, strategies to identify and retrieve the intended meaning without much difficulty. Nevertheless, there is still the possibility that recipients of figurative utterances work out a meaning hypothesis that they think is the correct one and which remains unchecked or is even seemingly approved by L1 speakers who may not be aware of it.

The data to be discussed in this paper come from a specialised type of ESL/EFL use, i.e. performance in interpretation tasks for the English idiomatic phrase *body politic*, performed by advanced learners and native speakers of English in further and higher university courses. After an initial discovery of unexpected variation in responses to this task, a larger pilot study has revealed systematic culture-specific patterns of interpretation, which put in doubt traditional assumptions about metaphor reception as a 'mirror' of metaphor production. In conclusion, we formulate hypotheses for explanations of our data within the framework of Cultural Linguistics.

2. Initial Evidence of Culture-Specific Interpretation Patterns for Metaphors[1]

The widely attested conceptual metaphors of NATION-AS-BODY and NATION-AS-PERSON are experientially grounded in the most immediate and universal source domains for conceptualisation imaginable: what could be more familiar to speakers than their own bodies and personalities (Kövecses, 2000, 2002, pp. 129-130)? Still, there is evidence of culture-specificity for one of their linguistic manifestations, e.g. the lexicalised phrase *body politic* in English, which strikes the reader/hearer as distinctive on account of its out-dated morphological composition with postponed adjective part and which in its current usage continues a discourse history that started with the loan translation from medieval Latin *corpus politicum* into the European vernacular languages (Charbonnel, 2010; Guldin, 2000; Hale, 1971; Musolff, 2009, 2010a, b). Today, the phrase belongs to a field of clichéd metaphors in English that refer to political topics in terms of bodily organs and functions, such as *head of state, head of government, long arm of the law, organ of a party, sclerosis or tumour of/in the body politic, heart of Britain/Europe* etc. (Deignan, 1995, p. 2; Room, 1999, pp. 149, 713). It is used by British and American media and politicians, e.g. in statements such as "finance and money exert a powerful influence on the upper reaches of the body politic" (*The Observer*, 2014, September 14); the "transplant of a European organ into the British body politic still requires constant reinforcement by immunosuppressant drugs" (*Financial Times*, 2013, January 17); or "campaign culture metastasize[d] throughout the entire body politic" (Obama, 2007, p. 16). The Conservative politician and Mayor of London, B. Johnson, even described himself ironically as "a mere toenail in the body politic" (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2005, November 20). French, German, Italian and other European languages show characteristically different usage patterns that relate to different discourse and lexicalisation histories (Musolff, 2011). However, whilst differing in detail, present-day uses of the NATION-AS-BODY/PERSON metaphors in European/ 'Western' discourse communities share several basic assumptions, i.e.

a) that the NATION-BODY is hierarchically ordered (e.g. a *toenail* being 'lower' than, for instance, the *head* or *heart*),

b) that it can fall ill and then needs medical treatment (Sontag, 1978), and

c) that, as a NATION-PERSON, it acts as a unitary and ethically responsible agent. These assumptions can be traced back through history to the beginnings of Western political thought in Greek and Roman philosophy rhetoric and literature (Charbonnel, 2010, pp. 4-29).

When teaching Communication Theory to international MA students at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in 2011, I introduced the phrase *body politic* as an example of a metaphor and ran a brief test to see how it was understood by the students by asking them to apply it to their home nation. Here are exemplary responses (the examples have been edited and normalized for English spelling and grammar, but no content has been added or changed):

(1) Student A: "The head of the body represents the Queen of England, as she is in charge of the whole country and she is royalty. The features of the head (eyes, nose, mouth and ears) represent the different official people, such as politicians, the Prime Minister, the Government."
(2) Student B: "If one organ or part of the national body suffers, the whole body would suffer from fever. In other words, having a healthy body requires healthy parts. As a nation, a problem in one area of a country should attract the attention of the whole people in that country."
(3) Student C: "2 Heads: Head of state is the king?—Not sure anymore! Head of government are [Prime Minister] Rajoy and the big banks' presidents."
(4) Student D: "The face: president and government; the brain: oligarchs, members of parliament (make all decisions in essence); the hands: official and unofficial local authorities (including mafia groups); the mouth: the media—controlled by the oligarchs/ MPs (dictate political ideology)."
(5) Student E: "Beijing: Heart and Brain, Shanghai: Face (economic center); Hong Kong and Taiwan: Feet; Tianjin: Hands (= army close to Beijing); Shenzhen: Eyes (= the first place open to the world)."
(6) Student F: "Beijing is the heart of China. […] The railway is the throat of China. Shanghai is the economic backbone of China. Tsingtao is the skeleton of Shandong province. Shenzhen is the liver of China; Tiananmen is the eye of Beijing. Nanjing is the face of Jiangsu; Szechuan is the hair of China; Xiangyang is the heel of China."
(7) Student G: "Beijing: brain (government); Shanghai: hug/arm (welcome to foreign people); Guangzhou: feet (keep China going); Hong Kong: face (familiar to everyone, representative); Taiwan: hair (necessary for beauty)."
(8) Student H: "[…] Taiwan: potential disease (sometimes it gives you trouble); Tibet: stomach (sometimes it makes you uncomfortable)."

Example (1) was produced by a British student, examples (2)-(4) by a Saudi Arabian, a Spanish and a Ukrainian student, respectively, and students E, F, G, and H are Chinese. Whilst all answers are correct in the sense that they fulfilled the task, the responses fall into two distinct classes. The first four responses describe a 'Western' political system in terms of a body's health and anatomy, even if, as in (4), substantial parts of the *body politic* seem to have been taken over by criminals or undemocratic forces. Responses (5)-(8), on the other hand, identify geographical places in China, and link them to parts of the human anatomy on the basis of functional correspondences between parts of the human body (*arm, brain, disease, eye, face, feet, hair, hands, head, heart, stomach*) and institutions or typical activities in the respective cities/provinces, and then associate these with further descriptive or evaluative explanations. These explanations serve to personalize the characterizations in the sense that they present the Chinese nation as presenting a *face* to the outside world, *hugging* those who are friendly towards it and actively *fighting* diseases.

The task of interpreting the phrase *body politic* had been successfully fulfilled in *all* the above examples, but it is also evident that the responses represent significantly different perspectives. The first four responses differ in the national target referents but have in common the fact that they depict the nation state and its institutions by functional analogies to the whole and parts of a human body. They adhere to the main perspectives that we have connected with the Western tradition, i.e., those of a hierarchical ordering, of the interdependence of all parts of the body as condition to maintain its health and of personal agency. We can thus conclude that the British student's answer and the responses by the Arab, Spanish, and Ukrainian students (all of whom had majored in English language and literature in their first degrees and may well have been aware of *body politic* imagery in English political history and poetry) stand in a loose but still tangible connection to that tradition.

In the Chinese students' responses, by contrast, a basic mapping: GEOGRAPHICAL SHAPE OF NATION (CHINA)—ANATOMY OF A HUMAN BODY, seems to be presupposed, salient parts of which are selected according to PLACE-FOR-POLITICAL INSTITUTION/FUNCTION metonymies (e.g. *Beijing—seat of government, Shanghai, Shenzen, Hong Kong—internationally relevant economic centres*). These metonymies are in turn analogically associated with functional interpretations of prominent body-parts and organs that partly resemble the 'Western' ones, e.g., *brain* or *heart* as controlling the rest of the body, *face*, *eyes*, *arms* as oriented to the outside world, *hair* as a variable physical property. These second-order analogies are loaded with evaluative interpretations, e.g., in the depictions of Taiwan as one of China's *feet* (as essential parts of the nation's body), or as *hair* (necessary for beauty) in examples (5) and (7).

The main contrast between the Chinese students' responses and the other examples lies in the metaphor-metonymy combinations that underlie its cognitive construction. For the Chinese respondents the geo-political metonymy serves as the foundation to construct the metaphor. One possible historical motivation for this distinct grounding of the metaphor may be found in the notion of China's publicly imagined "geobody" as part of its national identity. Callahan (2009) contends that contemporary Chinese visualizations of the nation's borders in maps are characteristic of a "Cartography of National Humiliation". Based on the historical experience of having been for several centuries the victim of repeated colonialist and imperialist attacks by foreign powers up until the mid-twentieth century, Chinese cartography has traditionally articulated fears of future territorial dismemberment (Callahan, 2009, p. 143). More recently, however, the author contends, the didactic goal of geopolitical maps in China is "no longer primarily to recover lost territory" but to achieve "symbolic recognition, acceptance and respect" (2009, p. 171). If geographical contours and locations are of such prominence in the public sphere of China, the grounding of conceptualizations of its *state organs* and *body parts* in geo-political metonymies, which we observed in the Chinese students' answers, makes good sense. We can formulate the hypothesis that the conceptual architecture of the metaphor-metonymy combinations in the NATION-AS-BODY/PERSON metaphors varies

in relation to culture-specific conceptual and discursive traditions, e.g. by giving special prominence to the "geobody" of the nation.

3. Further Evidence of Culture-Specific Interpretations of NATION-AS-BODY and NATION-AS-PERSON Metaphors

Of course, the "evidence" consisting of four student responses differing from another four is not sufficient on its own to substantiate a meaningful explanatory hypothesis; clearly a larger database was required. In the section, results of an attempt at such a widening of the database will be discussed, which provide quantitative and qualitative data that help to formulate more differentiated explanations. The data consist of responses to a standardised questionnaire that asked students to apply the BODY/-PERSON metaphors to their home nations.

In order to reduce any conceptual "priming" effects (beyond the reference to a "home" nation) to a minimum, the questionnaires were presented as brief exercises in lexical meaning-retrieval, to be completed within 5-10 minutes. They were administered in seven other UEA seminars and, with the generous help of colleagues, in two further British universities as well as in Higher/Further Education institutions of nine more countries (China, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania and Spain).[2] They yielded 648 completed questionnaires and involving participants from 31 different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with more than 75% being female students between the age of 18 and 25. Some answers were brief to the point of containing just one sentence, others included mini-essays of 250 words. The size of the linguistic cohorts varies considerably, with the Chinese, German and Italian ones numbering more than 100 each, whereas some languages were represented by just one speaker.

These conditions rule out any truly statistical analysis of the responses; however, a quantitative study was not the purpose of the survey. Rather, it aimed at finding out a) whether and how much conceptual variation in interpretations of the *body politic* metaphor, as applied to the nation, could be found, and b) whether any distribution patterns emerged that could tentatively be analysed as reflecting cultural traditions, with a view to preparing the ground for further, quantitatively validated surveys. In analysing the survey results we must bear in mind that the questionnaire did not elicit users' *implicit* understanding of the metaphors, but reflective interpretations of an *explicitly* presented metaphor that required some effort of semantic construal and its formulation in an answer. Thus, whilst the delivery was designed to minimise the chance of lengthy interpretation work, the answers represent not a record of users' automatic processing of the metaphors in question but their conscious explanations of possible meaning(s) of *body politic*.

3.1 Interpretations of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor

An 80% majority of informants responded by interpreting specifically the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor, the remaining 20% focused on the NATION-AS-PERSON reading, which

will be treated separately. After the first encounter with contrasting interpretations of the NATION-AS-BODY concept as either an anatomy-/function-based or geography-based metaphor in the 2011 test (see above), the survey showed clearly that there is no 1:1 match of interpretations in relation to specific linguistic/cultural groups. For instance, British and US students' responses both include geography-based readings that are compatible with Chinese students' answers:

(9) London, although located in the South East, can be considered as the 'head', directing operations as the brain does for the body. Birmingham, right in the centre of the country, could be said to act as the 'heart', controlling the flow of the 'blood' through the main arteries, including the M6 and M40 motorways and soon the high-speed rail link to London. Scotland and Wales are the 'limbs' to England's main body, on the periphery of the island but forming an integral part of our national identity.

(10) This is Britain, a vast, churning body of 48 million people, sucking in resources, processing them, and spewing out fumes and ideas. The mouth and nose are Dover and Portsmouth, sucking in the oxygen of European food and produce. It travels down the oesophagus of the motorways, arriving in the guts of the suburbs.

On the other hand, Chinese students can construct without problems the function-focused BODY PART-INSTITUTION mappings that are typical of the Western *body politic* tradition, and add humorous innovative applications of their own as in (14):

(11) The communist party is the head of the body. It leads the functions of the system, and decides national affairs. The government is the nervous system of the body.

(12) Laws are the eyes of our country. We are supervised by laws so that we dare not do something illegal.

(13) [If our country were a body,] every civilian is a cell. Any cell has its own function and it's indispensable. For instance, if all the cells on the foot left human body [*sic*], this person would become a cripple. Just as a country without its masses will be an incomplete state.

(14) Corrupt officials are like fine hairs on the arm. They grow there, thus humiliate the beauty of a lady by showing the world how they feed on people. […] Like the hairs, they can be shaved off but will later appear to your eyes again.

However, interpretations such as (11)-(14) only represent a minority of the Chinese cohort's responses. The ratio of anatomy-/function-based vs. geography-based interpretations of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor for the Chinese cohort is 1:3 (i.e. 16 vs. 48 responses). For the British/US cohort, this ratio is reversed, i.e. 2.9:1 (26 function- vs. 9 geography-based interpretations). For other European/'Western' cohorts with sufficiently many responses, the preponderance of the anatomy-/function-based reading over the geography-based interpretation is equal or even more pronounced, as demonstrated in the following table:

Table 1. Conceptual sources for *body politic* interpretations

	Anatomy/Physiology	Geography
German	61	4
Hungarian	16	5
Israeli	14	2
Italian	84	27
Polish	11	0
Romanian	32	0
Spanish	16	5

Although the figures for the British/US and Chinese cohorts and those in Table 1 cannot be regarded as statistically valid, they indicate a marked difference between Chinese and non-Chinese respondents for the *relative frequencies* of geography-based and anatomy/physiology-based metaphor-interpretations. The great majority of responses by Chinese students is geography-based, whereas the European, US and Israeli students are far more likely to reproduce parts of the 'Western' tradition of conceptualising the nation as a body 'whole' made up of interdependent and hierarchically ordered members and organs. (Geography-based responses were also recorded in questionnaires filled in by Japanese, Kurdish and French students but their cohort numbers are too low to allow for any meaningful comparison).

In addition to providing corroborating evidence supporting the distinction of at least two culture-specific tendencies in interpretations of the *body politic* metaphor, the questionnaire corpus analysis revealed two more interpretation perspectives, which focus on a) viewing the nation as part/organ of a larger body and b) configuring it as part of one's own personal body. The former perspective can be observed in examples (15)-(17), the latter in examples (18)-(20):

(15) England is like an appendix, not very significant anymore but can still cause trouble and make you realise its [*sic*] there if it wants to [English L1 informant]
(16) Norway is a hand waving to the world. [Norwegian L1 informant]
(17) Italy is the leg of Europe. [Italian L1 informant]

Many examples of this type invoke folk-theoretical and symbolic knowledge as the conceptual grounding, e.g. in the above examples: *appendix* as 'superfluous' organ, *hand*-waving as symbol of friendliness, the *leg of Europe*, which is closely linked to the stereotypical characterization of Italy as "Europe's boot" (Watts, 2009, p. 107). Other cases in which a nation is profiled against the background of the global community of nations include Germany as a FIST (on account of the two World Wars), Israel as a FINGERNAIL (on account of its size and being at the receiving end of design changes by outside powers), and China as the BACK of the world (on account of its stabilising

function for the global economy).

The alternative 'nation-as-part-of X' version, i.e. NATION AS PART OF ONE'S OWN BODY, is not present in some of the smaller national corpus samples but it forms a recurring pattern across the Chinese, British and German cohorts. Half of them are sourced, as in examples (19)-(21), from notions of HEART and BLOOD as the centre/medium of a person's identity, emotional existence and heritage:

(18) Motherland likes [*sic*, presumably intended: *is like*] my blood. Blood is a part of my body so that I can't live without blood, and I also can't live if I lost my motherland. What's more, motherland likes my blood [*sic*], because I feel its warmth and at the same time it provides me the 'oxygen' and 'nutrition'. [Chinese L1 informant]

(19) The nation is the heart of each body, where feelings are. [Spanish L1 informant]

(20) The nation is our blood, lungs and hearts. Nation is like the blood in the veins. Nation is like the heartbeating. [Hungarian L1 informant]

Other examples conceptualise the nation as one's own FEET/LEGS (for "standing up and going forward in the world"), HANDS ("creating the people") or EYES ("noticing the democracy and equality enjoyed by general citizens as well as the corruptions and irresponsibility of some government parasites").

These two interpretation perspectives of "NATION AS PART OF SELF" and "NATION AS PART OF INTERNATIONAL/GLOBAL STRUCTURE" provide platforms for intricate and often polemical or humorous interpretations. They contrast with the two more frequently represented, mainstream readings discussed earlier, i.e. the anatomy/function- and geography-based interpretations, which seem to be more standardised, repetitive and often have just minimal or no explanations. The latter readings may thus be seen as representing the standard interpretations of the *body politic* metaphor. By contrast, the less frequent NATION AS PART OF SELF and NATION AS PART OF INTERNATIONAL/GLOBAL STRUCTURE versions seem likely to be triggered by the didactic settings that motivated students to come up with imaginative answers. Nevertheless, these cases occur too often to be dismissed as exceptional and they, too, can be linked to historical usage traditions. Thus, to link the *body politic* to one's own personal body is conceptually close to the ancient tradition of regarding the *body politic* as a mystical attachment to a Monarch's personal *body natural* (Bertelli, 2001; Kantorowicz, 1997). These links need to be explored further before any conclusions can be drawn about their possible enduring significance in present-day metaphor understanding.

Overall, the systematic variation in the responses to metaphor interpretation tasks throws in question the assumption of an automatic understanding of metaphors in the speaker's intended sense, which underlies much traditional literature on metaphor. It opens up the possibility that seemingly unproblematic metaphorical communication may in fact *hide* differences in understanding. Doubtless, informants can interpret conventional metaphors very quickly and quasi-automatically when they are asked to produce just one

meaning and have been primed by source-related stimuli, as has been confirmed many times in psycholinguistic research (Gibbs, 1994; Giora, 2003; Glucksberg, 2001, 2008). However, our survey seems to show that with an open-ended question and less priming, responses to metaphor interpretation tasks can be much more varied and imaginative, and this variation still shows distribution patterns that are linked to culture-specific traditions. The degree to which respondents may be aware of these traditions remains to be explored further.

3.2 Interpretations of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor

Roughly one fifth of all responses (131 out of 648) focused on the PERSON concept as the source for the metaphorical conceptualisation of the NATION. The Chinese cohort provided the bulk of responses but we also found examples from the German, Israeli, Italian, Norwegian, Romanian, Spanish and Polish cohorts. Like the NATION-AS-BODY examples, the NATION-AS-PERSON interpretations show recurring patterns that provide insights into cultural tendencies of metaphor interpretation. The majority of responses from the Chinese cohort list character traits or activities of PERSON TYPES, as in the following examples:

(21) Our nation is like a mother, who covers her children under her protection. China is like a giant person who moves forward step by step. China is a teenager still full of energy to do things. […]. China is like an actor, who plays different roles on the world stage.

(22) China welcomes and gives warm hugs to foreigners who come to China. China is growing up day by day. China wears a beautiful dress to show her elegance to the whole world. China fights against violence bravely. China kissed the India [*sic*] and comforted them in a very kind way.

The characterisations of one's nation as a MOTHER or a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN dominate the Chinese sample: they account for 30 and 16 occurrences respectively, out of a total of 70 responses (66 of which were given by female respondents). The MOTHER or BEAUTIFUL WOMAN interpretations are also represented in Israeli, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish samples but, curiously, not in the German and British ones. The latter do contain some FATHER characterizations but the small number of occurrences (7 across the overall corpus) does not allow us to discern any specific socio-cultural trend. It would, however, be interesting to compare this finding with American data in view of the alleged domination of US political discourse by the STRICT FATHER model of the NATION-AS-FAMILY metaphor (Lakoff, 1996; Cienki, 2005).

The main MALE figure in the NATION-AS-PERSON characterisations, however, is the OLD WISE MAN/(GRAND)FATHER/TEACHER figure who looks after his family as caringly as the MOTHER does. This type is represented across several national cohorts, as the following examples show:

(23) China is a father who has survived many vicissitudes but still has infinite power. Hong Kong, who had been abandoned helplessly, is his favourite daughter among lots of children. Nowadays, after the excited and impressive coming, her father does all he can and does his best to compensate for this abandoned thing. (Chinese L1 informant)
(24) Our nation is just like an old man, full of cultural deposits, he is also a good teacher who told us so many things. […] (Chinese L1 informant)
(25) My nation looks like a 65 year old man, who is wise and clever but he hasn't been able to use his intelligence to become happy […]. (Greek L1 informant)
(26) Britain is an easily likeable friend, […] [He] is ancient but is experiencing revitalisation […]. (English L1 informant)
(27) As Abraham Avinu [Abraham our father] signed an alliance between god and his body, so does the land of Israel and all of it's [*sic*] citizens with god [*sic*]. (Hebrew L1 informant)
(28) […] when a group of people or a person is in pain he [Romania] is going to get help. (Romanian L1 informant)

This MALE FATHER/TEACHER figure collocates strongly with other characterizations that focus on wisdom and competence (including the roles of LAWYER, DOCTOR, PACIFIST, PHILANTROPIST), which altogether account for 53 responses. By contrast there seem to be only two responses that come close to the STRICT FATHER model, both of which betray no great liking or positive bias on the part of the interpreter:

(29) My country is like a muscular, middle-aged man. He […] has scarfs [*sic*] all over him, but still stands tall. He is white an [*sic*] catholic, but shows respect to others, […] He has a strict facial expression, even if he tries to smile. (German L1 informant)
(30) My Government is like a selfish father. His "kids" are affected by his decisions without being asked. […] (Spanish L1 informant)

Two related roles are those of the FIGHTER/WARRIOR (7 occurrences) and the GIANT (6 occurrences). However, they seem to be mainly motivated by the immediate topical and argumentative context of the respective answers: in the first place a focus on a nation's competition or conflict with another nation, and in the second place, a focus on China's territorial vastness. In addition, there are a few other characterizations (e.g. WRITER, SINGER, GODDESS, FIRE-FIGHTER) but they occur in very low numbers. Characterizations of one's own country as a BABY/CHILD only occur in responses by Chinese (9), Norwegian (2), Nigerian (1) and Belorussian students (1), relating as they do to these nations' regained statehood or economic/political strength. What emerges overall from these recurring characterizations is the picture of an EXTENDED FAMILY, in which NURTURE, SOLIDARITY and COMPETENCE are of prime importance. The two main results that can be gleaned from these data are a) a marked preference for MOTHER-type nation-concepts, especially among Chinese respondents, and b) the lack of STRICT FATHER-type characterizations across all 'national' cohorts.

There is a small sub-group of NATION-AS-PERSON interpretations in terms of national politics. These are sophisticated constructions that allude to topical and/or historical aspects, taking a specific political stance. Some of the NATION-AS-PART OF SELF responses cited above (NATION AS BLOOD/HEART, Germany as FIST, Norway as WAVING HAND) already hint at such perspectives but their formulation can be more elaborate, as the following examples show:

(31) Despite being a fairly young nation, Norway is already a full-grown petroholic. Like most addicts, Norway might appear well-functioning for longer periods of time […] Still, Norway frequently turns into a state of denial. (Norwegian L1 informant)

(32) The Romanian nation […] knows too well the price of hardship and whose hard work has left deep marks on its soul. It […] puts a lot of soul in everything it does. […] It has not learnt yet that mind and reason should prevail over soul and heart. (Romanian L1 informant)

(33) The guts of the country remain from when we had an empire (think Elizabeth I). (= caption to drawn 'stick man' representation of the *body politic* by English L1 informant)

In these examples, nation-specific experiences of economic development, crisis and historical change are reinterpreted as personality traits, with the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor providing a platform for political comments, exhorting as they do Norway to turn away from its addictive lifestyle, Romania to let its mind reign over the heart and Britain (or England) to remember it still has courage (*guts*) left despite the loss of its Empire.

4. Conclusions

This article has provided data from a questionnaire corpus about the reception and understanding aspect of political metaphor, which in many previous studies has been assumed to simply mirror the meaning intended by the speaker. Our principal finding is that metaphor understanding and interpretation is at least as variable as metaphor use and production, if not more so. Even for a centuries-old mapping such as that between the human body/person on the one hand and the (nation) state and society on the other, understanding is neither automatic nor universal but, on the contrary, variable and culture-specific/-sensitive.

This variation is particularly visible in the striking contrast between the two main preferred/most frequent versions of corporeal conceptualisations of the nation in the questionnaire responses. Chinese responses clearly favoured interpretations based on a geography-institution metonymy, which was interpreted further metaphorically. In contrast, the majority of 'Western' responses focused on the hierarchically ordered, anatomy-, physiology- or agency-based analogies to political institutions that have been the staple of Western political theories since Antiquity. In addition, two less frequent

but still noticeable interpretation patterns emerged in the survey: the conceptualization of the nation as an organ/part of a larger (international or global) body and its 'reverse' version, i.e. the understanding of the nation as part of the interpreter's own body. Some of these latter response-types gave rise to highly elaborated interpretations that used the basic scenario of a nation state 'acting like a person' to achieve special argumentative, polemical and ironic effects.

This latter perspective is especially relevant for the second group of responses that we discussed, i.e. interpretations of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor. On the one hand we found evidence for the conceptualisation of the state as an AUTHORITY-FIGURE IN A FAMILY, with the great majority of responses focusing on the role of a NURTURING AND WISE PARENT, stereotypically represented as MOTHER. This version embeds the nation-personification in an EXTENDED FAMILY scenario, which seems to account for many roles that a nation state can fulfil. Apart from this main pattern stand the exceptional cases of interpretations that produce polemical or humorous comments on the historical, political or social stereotypes about one's own nation. The cited interpretative personifications of 'typical' German STRICTNESS, Norwegian PETROHOLISM, Romanian SOUL-CENTREDNESS or British/English nostalgia for the EMPIRE are based on national stereotypes that serve the respective writer as objects of endorsement, critique or humorous questioning. In the light of these findings the assumption of a naïve hearer/reader who understands and accepts 'automatically' the ideological bias of political metaphors becomes less plausible.

The study opens up a new arena for empirical research into the relationship between metaphor production and reception on the one hand and cultural context on the other. If the hypotheses about preferred and non-preferred interpretations across specific cohorts belonging to diverse cultural traditions are corroborated in further studies, they can help to enhance our understanding of the social emergence, dissemination and and entrenchment of political stereotypes. From a "Cultural Linguistics" perspective (Sharifian, 2015), this outlook is of particular methodological significance. As "cultural conceptualisations", metaphors are "intrinsic to cultural cognition" (Sharifian, 2015, p. 6). If speakers and hearers in inter-cultural communication fail to realize their integration in diverse cultural schemas and world views, metaphors can lead to subtle but far-reaching misunderstandings, as has been shown for metaphor use in Aboriginal English vis-à-vis Australian English contact (Sharifian, 2014, pp. 121-126) and in contexts of language endangerment (Idström & Piirainen, 2012).

Whilst previous studies have focused on finding cross-cultural contrasts and resulting problems of misunderstanding between 'producers' and 'receivers' of metaphors, our survey concentrated on the latter's interpretation attempts. The overt task (application of the metaphor to one's home nation) evidently encouraged respondents to access and activate culture-specific background knowledge. The resulting conceptualisations not only influenced the *content* of the metaphor application (which would have been easily predictable) but also its *structure*, in that contrasting perspectives of constructing

the underlying mappings (GEOBODY v. functional analogies, NATION-AS-PART-OF-SELF v. NATION-AS-SELFS- VIS-À-VIS OTHER NATION-PERSONS) were shown to be differentially distributed across cohorts and could be motivated by historical traditions and topical debates that characterize the respective discourse communities. These results were not predictable from the task as set and provide new independent empirical evidence of the "cultural" dimension of metaphor interpretation and understanding. Obviously, these findings need to be corroborated further and methodologically refined but they promise a way forward for developing empirical investigation techniques that reveal the 'deep' cultural grounding of metaphorical conceptualizations which on the surface may appear to be uniformly understood universals.

Notes

1 The data for this section were reported also in Musolff (2014) in a different thematic context.

2 I am very grateful to the colleagues and students at the universities of Aston, Birmingham and East Anglia in the UK, Heidelberg University (Germany); the Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest (Hungary), the Universities of Estremadura and La Mancha in Spain, Hadassah College and Hebrew University in Israel; the University of Verona (Italy), Oslo University (Norway), Cracow College "Stairways School of English" (Poland), the University of Bucharest (Romania); the University of Verona (Italy), Hangzhou Normal University in the People's Republic of China (esp. Juyuan Li) for their support and contributions.

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