Mapping Metaphors in Modern Greek: Life is a Journey

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When M. Johnson and G. Lakoff published "Metaphors We Live By", they were at the forefront of a radical change in thinking about metaphors. Metaphors, they suggested, are not simply poetic parts of speech, or obscure idiomatic expressions, but rather part of our larger cognitive reasoning. Metaphors in the language form part of larger, conceptual metaphors that help us understand and talk about the world we live in.

Using this theory of metaphors as a theoretical framework, my presentation will focus on the Modern Greek language and examine the presence of the "universal" conceptual metaphor "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" and its culture-specific dimensions. This conceptual metaphor envisages life as a journey, with birth as the point of embarkation and death as the final destination. So in English for example, humans encounter "twists and turns", "get lost" but later "find their way" and often "come to a crossroads". In Modern Greek, this metaphor is present in the discourse of love, religion and daily life. There is evidence from ancient Greece that the "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" metaphor has been conceptualised since antiquity.

Linguistic data has been collected using a Greek corpus, as well as examples from media and literature. The analysis of "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" and conceptual metaphors in Modern Greek more generally will not only help us gain insight into the language, thought processes and culture of the Greek people, but will also serve as a comparative tool which will contribute to the understanding and extent of "universal" metaphors.

1 Theoretical Background

Traditionally, metaphor, along with other parts of “creative” speech like similes, hyperboles, etc., is viewed as fundamentally linguistic in nature and is “assigned a peripheral role in language, as an ornament or, at best, a mechanism for filling lexical gaps in the language” (Deignan 2005:2). In the past 30 years, however, a theory of metaphors has emerged that would support the idea that all humans have command of metaphors and in fact the way we think about the world — and talk about it — is largely metaphorical in nature. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are responsible for reformulating and popularising this view in the 20th century. In their groundbreaking work Metaphors We Live By, Lakoff and Johnson (1980:4) maintained the idea that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” but suggested that metaphors do not have a linguistic basis, but rather a conceptual one. A revised definition of metaphors in the vein of cognitive linguistics defines it as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” (Kövecses 2002:4).

In the schema introduced by the cognitive linguists, “the linguistic expressions (i.e. ways of talking) make explicit, or are manifestations of, the conceptual metaphors (i.e. ways of thinking)…it is the metaphorical linguistic expressions that reveal the existence of conceptual metaphors” (Kövecses 2002:6). The domain we use to shape our metaphorical linguistic expressions is called the source domain, while the conceptual domain we talk about and understand through the use of these metaphors is the target domain. In the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY we have used the source domain of a journey to
understand the target domain of life. This conceptual metaphor envisages life as a journey, with birth as the point of embarkation and death as the final destination. In English, for example, humans encounter “twists and turns”, “get lost” but later “find their way” and often “come to a crossroads”. Speakers tap the domain of journey so heavily in order to comprehend life because “the metaphor provides a framework... connecting diverse experiences by making use of our concrete and universally shared experience of literal journeys” (Deignan 2005:17).

In this paper, I will examine how the source domain of journey is used to understand the target domain of life in the Modern Greek language, with some reference also to Ancient Greek. I have looked at the different ways in which this conceptual metaphor takes form linguistically. Since I am working under the assumption that “the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:22), I hope that this study will be revealing both linguistically and anthropologically in terms of Greek society.

Apart from understanding how the Greeks specifically conceptualise life and the cultural and linguistic implications this has, I hope this research will contribute to a growing body of work that collectively seems to indicate that LIFE IS A JOURNEY is present cross-culturally. This has additional significance; since “metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way, we can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and to gain an understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities” more generally (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:7). It will be obvious to anyone reading this paper that there are many similarities in the way Greek speakers and English speakers utilize the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

For the present study, I have utilized a corpus (in the general sense of the term); I also recorded metaphor usage in native speakers and have tried to take advantage of my own knowledge and intuitions. The reason I have used a combination of multiple popular methodologies is twofold. First, while some researchers rely solely on corpus analysis because they believe it helps minimize the subjectivity present in methodologies like Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980), I disagree with this line of thinking. It seems problematic to suggest that corpus analysis is independent of the subjectivity of the native speaker when, in order to search a corpus, a researcher must select, input and scan the results of a keyword or term. Thus, what is searched for depends entirely on the subjectivity of the researcher. Second, my hope is that by collecting information from a variety of sources, my findings will not be restricted to: 1) the limitations of my own memory; 2) the erroneous self-reporting of native speakers or 3) a mere detailing of Greek, without any understanding of it as a cognitive system.

My corpus consists of a variety of sources, including literature, folk and contemporary song lyrics, and newspaper articles. I estimate the total word count of collected materials to be between 200,000-350,000 words. I did a systematic search of certain keywords using the online archives of Ελευθεροτυπία (Eleftherotypia), a well-known Greek newspaper, and thoroughly charted their presence over the course of three months. The words included δρόμος and οδός both terms for ‘road’; ταξίδι ‘journey’; πέρασα ‘to pass through’; Χάρος ‘Charon’; οδύσσεια ‘odyssey’; and were selected based on my own intuitions about the presence of LIFE IS A JOURNEY in Greek. The input and identification of keywords was a

1 One way to define linguistic metaphor is to say that it “refers to the realization of a cross-domain conceptual mapping” (Deignan 2005:34).
2 Figure estimated based on total number of works, where for each work an average word count per page was created and multiplied by the number of pages.
necessary part of the research, since there is no automatic way of identifying
metaphors using corpus data. I also relied on entries in the Λεξικό Νεοελληνισμών (1991), a Greek
dictionary dedicated to non-literal language use and idiomatic expressions. In addition, I examined the
lyrics and titles from a collection of about 1000 songs.

Finally, during my stays in Greece over the last year, I took extensive notes on
pertinent expressions uttered by native speakers either in person or through radio and TV
broadcasting. I have not gathered any material using elicitation techniques, so therefore all
descriptions have occurred naturally in speech, except when the source was scripted (as in TV
broadcasting). All examples that were collected in this way are described as ‘speech samples’
throughout the paper. Examples that are based on my own intuition are identified as
‘common expressions’. In order to examine the presence of LIFE IS A JOURNEY in
antiquity, I used sources from the classical literary cannon, like Homer, Sophocles and
Hesiod. I also turned to ancient Greek mythology, as well as philosophy.

The translation of the Modern Greek examples is entirely my own. It is particularly
challenging to translate examples in a way that highlights the literal language that is used but
also conveys the metaphorical meaning accurately. All my examples use metaphoric language
and convey some aspect of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor and are not to be taken in
their literal context. When the meaning of the sentence is not clear in English, I have used
footnotes in addition to translations. The Ancient Greek sources have been translated into
English according to the author specified in the references.

3 MAPPINGS

In order to comprehend the full scope of LIFE IS A JOURNEY in Greek, it is necessary to
detail the various ways in which the notion of a journey lends itself to the conceptualisation
of life. The systematic conceptual correspondences that occur “between the source and the target
in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of B correspond to constituent elements of
A... are often referred to as mappings” (Kövecses 2002:6). In a manner that closely resembles
English, LIFE IS A JOURNEY in Greek can be mapped out in the following way:

3.1 Journey---------------Life

The language used to describe life is shaped by the superimposed imagery of a journey:

(1) Όπου το μάτι μου γυρίσω, όπου και αν δω
   Ερείπια μαύρα της ζωής μου βλέπω εδώ
   Που τόσα χρόνια πέρασα
   και ρήμαξα και χάλασα (Kavafis 1986:37).
   Wherever I turn my eye, wherever I look
   I see the black ruins of my life here
   That for so many years I passed through
   And pillaged and destroyed.

   In Greek, ζωή ‘life’ often is described as having a beginning, direction, destinations,
obstacles, turns and an end. It is up to humans to navigate through life, often with the help of
a guide or travel companion. The terms προσανατολισμός ‘orientation’ and πορεία ‘progress,
course or fortune’ are particularly interesting because they rarely are used in their literal
sense, but rather as means of foregrounding journey imagery.

   Further proof that life is conceptualised the same way as a journey can be found in the
titles of many biographical works. Greek linguist Giannis Psiharis’s autobiography is titled To
Τάξιδι μου ‘My Journey’ (1993); Clio Loumou-Markaki named her biography of Manoli
Markaki Η Πορεία της Ζωής Του ‘The Course of His Life’ (2006). Because a biography is by
definition about one’s life, a title that references a journey inextricably links the two domains.

3 All examples of mapping will occur in the same format: an arrow will point from the source domain to the
target domain.
3.2 Destinations/Stops----------→Goals & Achievements

In the Western tradition, life can be broken up into stages that correspond with accomplishing our goals. Reaching a goal is paralleled with the notion of reaching a destination on a journey: it is noteworthy, and cause for celebration and perhaps rest.

(2) Πότε ένοιωσες ό, τι πραγματικά έφτασες; (speech sample)
When did you feel like you truly arrived?*

The verb περνάω ‘to pass’ is particularly pertinent to this discussion. Περνάω implies a physical orientation, but is used metaphorically to describe emotional experiences as if they were stops along a journey:

(3) Πέρασα απο πολλές στεναχώριες (common expression).
I passed through a lot of sorrow.

Our lives depend on predetermined goals to give us a sense of purpose. Someone without goals is viewed as directionless and perhaps leading a meaningless existence. In Greek, to say that someone ‘stays’ on a road means they have not reached their goals/destinations:

(4) Είχε πει ότι θα σπούδαζε, αρχίσε, αλλά έμεινε στον δρόμο (Dimitriou 1995:84).
He said he would go to university, he started, but stayed on the road.

Interestingly enough, the Greek word for career is σταδιοδρομία, a compound that breaks down into the word στάδιο ‘stages’ and δρόμος ‘road’. In this instance, one’s career—a vital part of one’s life also is viewed as a journey, with each job experience akin to stops along the trip.

3.3 Traveller----------→Human

The way a traveller is described as part of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor can be very revealing. For instance, if a traveller is able to deal with adversity on the journey, this translates into a resourceful and intelligent human:

(5) Το καλό το παιδάκι ξέρει και άλλο μονοπάτι (common expression).
A good fellow knows another route.

A traveller’s physical handicap attests to the difficulty in accomplishing a goal. This can be considered an extension of the Traveller→Human mapping. If a traveller conducts her journey and/or reaches her destination injured, blind, in physical pain, etc., it implies an unexpected, additional degree of difficulty:

(6) Κουτσά-στραβά πήρε το δίπλωμά του (Dimitriou 1995:182).
He completed his diploma limping and crookedly.

A further extension of the mapping has to do with the burden of the traveller. Here we see the incorporation of the DIFFICULTY IS A BURDEN conceptual metaphor into LIFE IS A JOURNEY. In general, the challenge of the journey grows exponentially alongside the size and weight of the traveller’s burden, something that is reflected in the recorded speech samples below:

(7) Έχει τραβήξει πολλά στη ζωή του. Τραβάς κανείς ξόρι?
He has pulled a lot (of weight) in his life. You pulling some weight?

*This sentence means something like “When did you feel like you truly made it [found success]?”
Finally, just as a traveller can leave traces along a journey, a human has the ability to leave her own mark behind. A reference to this notion can be found in Greek, as well as in English:

(8) Βαδίζει στα χνάρια της μητέρας της (speech sample).
   She is following in her mother’s footsteps.

3.4 Weather conditions—Degree of hardships

Another aspect of the journey domain that is used metaphorically when talking about life is the weather. Just as the weather is unpredictable, the course of one’s life too can change suddenly. A clear view of the horizon means a clear view of what lies ahead in life, in terms of both challenges and achievements. Favourable weather means that life is continuing without particular difficulty. On the other hand, bad weather stands for hardships, often unexpected:

(9) Μπόρα είναι θα περάσει (common expression).
   It is a storm and it will pass.

This particular mapping of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor is so ingrained in Greek people’s mentality that it has shaped the way people curse. To wish someone bad weather means to wish someone bad luck. Along the same lines, if someone is grumpy or cynical, Greek people say it is because of his own bad weather:

(10) Κακό καιρό να’ χεις! (speech sample)    Τον κακό σου το καιρό (Dimitriou 1995:126).
   May you have bad weather?    Your own bad weather (makes you do this).

3.5 Different Roads—Different Choices

Just as travellers must choose a certain route in order to reach their destinations, and are flanked with many options along the way, humans too must determine which course they want their lives to take. When humans make decisions about their career, morality, love life, etc., this is the equivalent of travellers choosing to follow one road over another:

(11) Αυτός ο δρόμος θα τους οδηγήσει στην καταστροφή (Dimitriou 1995:83).
   This road will lead you to a catastrophe.

(12) Πήρε τα βουνά (Dimitriou 1995:53).
   He took to the mountains.

To describe coming to an impasse in life, that is to feel left without choices, Greeks invoke the imagery of a dead-end:

(13) Μπρος γκρεμός και πίσω ρέμα (common expression).
   Ahead there is cliff and behind a stream.

(14) Είμαι σε αδιέξοδο (speech sample).
   I am at a dead-end.

3.6 End of Road—Death

The final correlation that occurs between journey and life for the purposes of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor is that of a final destination and death. Travellers may make various stops along the way, but inevitably their journey will come to an end. The physical

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5 Even in English it seems impossible to describe this aspect of life devoid of any LIFE IS A JOURNEY references.
6 This means he/she chose to isolate him/herself.
aspect of approaching death, as one would approach a final stop, is apparent in much of the discourse on death:

(15) Είναι με το ένα πόδι στον τάφο (Dimitriou 1995:373).
She has one foot on the grave.

(16) Βαδίζει σθένος προς τον θάνατο του (Stefanides 2007:1).
He is walking boldly toward his death.

Evoking journey imagery is a critical part of formulating death euphemisms. After a long journey, travellers are tired and need rest and sleep. Along the same lines, when humans die, we use vocabulary that is borrowed from the journey domain to create euphemisms for death. For example, the English word cemetery can be traced back to the Greek word κοιμητήριο, which literally means ‘sleeping place’. Death euphemisms draw heavily on the journey source domain through the use of words like sleep, rest and closing one’s eyes, among others, as substitutes:

(17) Κουράστηκε πολύ, μα επιτέλους αναπαύεται (speech sample).
He grew very tired, but finally he is resting.

4 Evidence From Antiquity

One criterion for evaluating how fundamental metaphors are to a culture is their degree of conventionality, i.e. how well established and deeply entrenched they are within a society. The LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor can be classified as highly conventional in Greece because it has been prevalent since antiquity. Perhaps because ancient Greece was so influential in structuring Western thought, we see many similarities in the realization of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor across European languages and cultures.

Ancient Greeks had a very strong conceptualisation of humans’ final journey towards death, although there are variations dependent both on the time period and location of the description. Sometimes the dead are believed to descend into an underworld, while other times they journey to the very edge of the earth. What is consistent, however, in all conceptualisations of the afterlife is that it is underpinned by the idea of a geographic location. According to one version in Greek mythology, upon death humans’ psychai leave their bodies and begin the trip to the underworld. Greeks so firmly believed in this final journey, that “the deceased [were] presented with a small coin which came to be known as the ferrying fee for Charon” (Burkert 1985:192).

The king of the underworld is Hades, the brother of Zeus and the husband of Persephone. He rules over the dead with the assistance of Charon, the ferryman who brings the newly deceased to the House of Hades. In the death schema produced by the ancient Greeks, death is personified; he is part of a family, experiences a wide breadth of emotions and holds a sceptre. In order to facilitate understanding of the unknown, the ancient Greeks made use of the familiar source domain of the self. By personifying death, they tried “to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms — terms that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions and characteristics” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:34). The specific attributes given to the personification of death fall under the scope of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor and help fortify its schematic mappings.

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7 Κοιμητήριο still is used to mean cemetery in Modern Greek, although νεκροταφείο is more common.
8 Here I refer to ancient Greece and ancient Greek religion in much the same way as Burkert (1985) does: namely, a period of roughly 1100 years that begins after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization sometime between 1200 and 800 B.C.E. and ends definitively “with proscription of all pagan cults by Emperor Theodosius in 393 [C.E.]” (Burkert 1985:7).
9 Hades refers to both the location of the underworld and to its ruler.
The personification of death stems from the fundamental belief that “we comprehend external events as actions. This entails an important consequence; namely, that we view events as produced by an active, willful agent” (Köveses 2002:50). Humans are frightened by the idea of death merely “occurring” and prefer to view it — through personification — as an agent “taking away” life. This is as true for ancient Greeks as it is for the current population; while Christianity has superimposed its own characters on the old personifications, there is still linguistic evidence linking the contemporary to the classical, as evidenced by the Modern Greek colloquialisms below:

(18) Κι όποιον πάρει ο Χάρος! (speech sample).

Let whomever be taken by Charon!  

(19) Είδα τον Χάρο με τα μάτια μου (Dimitriou 1995:425).

I saw Charon with my own eyes.

Very few get to escape the misery of death and Hades and instead go to the Elysian Fields. What both Hades and the Elysian Fields have in common is that they are conceptualised as destinations, not states of being, and they both require a significant journey before they can be reached.

5 Conclusion

In my paper, I hope to have shown that the analysis of metaphors can be valuable in enhancing our understanding and appreciation of many different areas, including the language, culture and history of a particular people. Also, studies like these can be of particular interest to those interested in the issues surrounding foreign language acquisition, or specifically students of Greek, since “conceptual metaphors are a very useful tool for learners of ...[foreign] languages because they could illuminate networks of associated figurative meanings, giving access to large numbers of frequently used vocabulary items” (Deignan 2005:26).

More generally, and perhaps more importantly, are the universal implications that go along with researching conceptual metaphors: “because metaphor is a primary tool for understanding our world and our selves, entering into an engagement with powerful...metaphors is grappling in an important way with what it means to have a human life” (Lakoff & Turner 1989:11 of preface). The identification and charting of universal metaphors has the potential to shed light onto some fundamental aspect of our cognitive functions and our human existence at large. Thus, metaphor studies should be an area of inquiry for researchers in a variety of areas, including linguistics, anthropology, history and the cognitive sciences.

The present study is far from exhaustive. I have attempted to cover a lot of ground in a relatively short paper, which means there are many points that could be expanded upon. At the same time, I tried to avoid giving any of the areas I covered a superficial treatment, which inevitably means there are many points that have yet to be touched upon. My hope is that this study will lay the groundwork for — and perhaps invite — additional research into the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, its sociolinguistic role in Greece and its significance in a universal context.

10 Means ‘...and whatever happens, happens!’
11 Means ‘to barely escape danger’.
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