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In Search of Metonymic Motivation for Semantic Change: The Case of Words with Remarkable Origins

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to account for the semantics of selected terms of Germanic, Romance and Arabic origin, labelled by the editors of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as the "top ten words with remarkable origins", which initially referred to objects, animals, places and later started to be employed figuratively in various human- and nonhuman-related contexts. The theoretical framework adopted in the research embraces such tools offered by Cognitive Linguistics as conceptual metaphor and metonymy. The paper attempts to explain the conceptual motivation behind the semantics of the targeted terms. The results of the research may be said to corroborate not only the conceptual nature of metaphors/metonymies as such but also their impact on social cognition.
Keywords: conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, metonymic chain, source, target

1. Introduction

Metaphor and metonymy are regarded as important conceptual mechanisms motivating semantic change (see, for example, Traugott, 2012). Sometimes a metaphorical or metonymic sense starts to dominate which may, in turn, cause the loss of a literal sense, while in other cases it becomes a new sense functioning next to the literal one. As a result, a lexical item may develop several metaphorical and metonymic senses over time.

When analysing the historical meaning development of words, one may face a number of obstacles. One of them might be cases of loanwords enriching the lexicon of English with only the figurative senses characterising their donor languages, which leads to the problem of interpretation of the metaphorical or metonymic senses found in their English form. It is, therefore, not always clear whether the meanings found in the English versions of the borrowings should be regarded as figurative or literal. In this account, I delve into individual semantic histories of both originally Germanic lexemes in which the transition of meaning from literal to figurative can easily be established and those in the case of which the figurative senses have been borrowed from such languages as Italian, French or Arabic.

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The aim set to this paper is thus to account for the semantics of the "top" ten (see section 3) English terms of Germanic, Romance and Arabic origin with surprising origins (*trivia*, *hazard*, *muscle*, *avocado*, *handicap*, *fiasco*, *slapstick*, *bedlam*, *eavesdrop*, *phon(e)y*) which are used figuratively in various human- and nonhuman-related contexts. An attempt is made to show in what way the mechanisms of conceptual metaphor and metonymy may be used to account for the semantic motivation of the analysed words. Being inspired by Paradis (2011, p. 2), I refer to the concept of metonymization which "involves the use of a lexical item to evoke the sense of something that is not conventionally linked to that particular item". It will become clear in later sections of the paper that a vast majority of the terms subject to analysis seem to have developed figurative senses due to the activation of the mechanism of metonymization which holds between senses. The ultimate conclusion one may arrive at is that this mental process may be regarded as "a key mechanism in semantic change" (Paradis, 2011, p. 1).

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, I briefly present the methodology, namely the cognitive framework adopted in the paper (section 2), the way I have obtained the data for my investigation (section 3), similar research (section 4) and the contrastive perspective from which the "top ten" terms used in the research are investigated (section 5). The analysis proper (section 6) is conducted with the aid of the methodological tools offered by the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm. Last but not least, the major findings, conclusions, and implications for future research may be found in the paper's final section.

2. Methodology

In this account, I refer to the theory of conceptual metaphor proposed originally by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) which was later modified by a number of scholars (e.g., Kövecses, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2020) and conceptual metonymy (e.g., Kövecses & Radden, 1998; Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Littlemore 2015). I follow the definition of metaphor advocated by Kövecses (2015, p. ix) for whom

> conceptual metaphors consist of sets of systematic correspondences, or mappings between two domains of experience and […] the meaning of a particular metaphorical expression realizing an underlying conceptual metaphor is based on such correspondences.

In turn, the view of conceptual metonymy pursued in this paper is that proposed by Kövecses (2006, p. 99) for whom

> metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual element or entity (thing, event, property), the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity (thing, event, property), the target, within the same frame, domain or idealized cognitive model (ICM).

The mechanism of metonymization as discussed by Paradis (2011) seems to be instrumental in semantic change. Due to this mechanism, a lexical item is used to embody the sense of something that is not normally connected with that particular lexical item.

Some of the semantic developments analysed in this paper seem to be motivated by more than one metonymic projection, that is a series of metonymies known as metonymic chains. The term metonymic chain or chained metonymy has been used in research on metonymy by a number of researchers, for example, Barcelona (2005), Brdar (2015), Fass (1991), Hilpert (2007), Kiełtyka (2018), Kiełtyka and Grząśko (2022), Nerlich & Clarke (2001), Radden and Kövecses (1999), Reddy (1979), Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2008). Hilpert (2007, p. 80) argues that some of the studies mentioned above are, first and foremost concerned with metonymies involving multiple conceptual shifts, breaking up "complex conceptual mappings into simple, well-motivated mappings with a strong experiential basis" (p. 80). As for metonymic chains, Hilpert (2007, p. 81) emphasises the fact that the English expression *with an eye on NP* (a noun phrase) is polysemous, conveying 'vision', 'attention', and 'desire'. The proposed model of metonymic chains (eye → vision → attention → desire) naturally accounts for this polysemy, since people tend to watch the things they pay attention to, and pay attention to the things they desire. The semantics of some of the lexical items addressed in my research seem to be accounted for in terms of metonymic chains, which involve more than one conceptual shift.

3. The corpus

The corpus of data subject to analysis is obtained from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* website whose editors, in the section "Words at Play", discuss their "top" ten words with remarkable origins.

Two sources were consulted to find the frequency of use of the analysed terms: the Google search engine and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*. The order of the terms ranked according to their frequency of use in the Google search engine is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The frequency of use of the "top" ten words with remarkable origins – results obtained from the Google search engine

Term	Number of occurrences
muscle	6,930,000,000 results
trivia	1,030,000,000 results
hazard	917,000,000 results
handicap	598,000,000 results
avocado	529,000,000 results
fiasco	42,300,000 results

phony/ phoney	30,600,000 results / 4,750,000 results
eavesdrop	20,000,000 results
slapstick	14,400,000 results
bedlam	9,120,000 results

Table 2 presents the frequency of use of the analysed words in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*.

Table 2. Frequency of use of the analysed words in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*

Term	Frequency of use in the corpus
hazard	6336 hits
phony / phoney	4959 hits / 408 hits
handicap	3110 hits
trivia	2789 hits
fiasco	2541 hits
avocado	2442 hits
muscle	2317 hits
eavesdrop	609 hits
slapstick	575 hits
bedlam	487 hits

A cursory glance at the frequency of use of the terms subjected to analysis provided both by the Google search engine and the *COCA* corpus shows that, although the results obtained from the two sources differ, the "top" ten terms selected by the editors of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* enjoy considerable productivity

4. Similar research

Allan (2014, 2015) provided inspiration for this paper. She discussed the loss of literal senses of conceptual metaphors and the sense development of borrowed metaphor. Some of the lexical items discussed in the paper have been borrowed into English with already figurative senses (e.g., *hazard, avocado, fiasco, muscle, trivia*), others, like the native *eavesdrop, slapstick, phon(e)y, handicap* and *beldam* developed figurative senses in the course of their semantic development in English.

Moreover, the papers by Paradis (2011) and Koch (2012), which emphasise the role of metonymy in semantic change, have been additional stimuli in my research into the history of the words analysed in this paper. Finally, the paper "Metonymy as a prototypical category" by Peirsman and Geeraerts (2006) deserves a mention because it offers an interesting treatment of metonymy, a conceptual mechanism responsible for several semantic changes discussed in this research. Last but not

least, the research conducted by Nerlich and Clarke (2001), emphasising the role of the so-called serial metonymy or metonymic chains in both synchronic and dia-chronic investigations, inspired my research which also focuses on the presence of chained metonymy as a mechanism leading to semantic changes in the terms analysed in the paper.

5. The "top" ten terms of remarkable origin from a contrastive perspective

Using the *Online dictionary* website I have searched more than 100 languages in six different groups (European, Asian, Middle-Eastern, African, Austronesian and other languages) in order to indicate the range of use of the analysed lexical items (*trivia*, *hazard*, *muscle*, *avocado*, *handicap*, *fiasco*, *slapstick*, *bedlam*, *eaves-drop*, *phon(e)y*) provided by https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/top-10-words-with-remarkable-origins-vol-1/fiasco.

It is important to emphasise the fact that taking into consideration the dif-ferences between the Roman script and the writing systems of Asian languages, I decided to disregard the latter ones. In these cases, the numbers provided should be interpreted as rough estimates. The results of my research (which unfortunately for space reasons cannot be reproduced here in detail) have shown that the words *fiasco* and *avocado* are present in more than 60 different languages. The lexical item *bedlam* can be found in about 50 languages, while *trivia(l)* in circa 32 lan-guages. Details are shown in Table 3.

Even a glance at the data listed in Table 3 makes it possible to claim that such terms as *fiasco* and *avocado* enjoy an almost universal status cross-linguistically, which, in all likelihood, may result from the interaction between different cultures. One can naturally emphasise the role of Latin (e.g. *muscle*), but also Romance languages as exemplified by Italian (e.g. *fiasco*) and French (from which *hazard* entered English). As far as European languages are concerned, we may safely say that nearly half of the words provided by https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/top-10-words-with-remarkable-origins-vol-1/fiasco may be said to have attained near-universal status: *fiasco* may be found in 88% of European lan-guages, *avocado* in 83%, *trivia* in 60%, *handicap* in 54% and *muscle* in 52% of this group of languages. A possible reason for this status quo is the fact that lan-guages sharing similar or the same cultural roots naturally have a lot in common, which may result in the presence of similar or virtually identical forms of some lexical items in the analysed languages. Various cultures around the world have their own traditions or customs and, as a result, their conceptualization of certain notions/phenomena is similar.

Table 3. Distribution of the analysed lexical items across languages of the world

	European languages (42)[1]	Asian languages (36)[2]	Middle-Eastern languages (4)[3]	African languages (13)[4]	Austronesian languages (10)[5]	Other languages (3)[6]
trivia(l)[7]	25	≤ 3	0	≤ 1	0	3
hazard	1	0	0	1	1	0
muscle	22	≤ 3	≈ 1	≤ 1	0	2
avocado	35	≤ 13	2	≤ 5	5	2
handicap	23	≈ 4	1	≈ 4	≈ 1	2
fiasco	37	≤ 10	≤ 1	≤ 11	4	2
slapstick	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results
bedlam	15	≤ 15	≈ 1	12	3	0
eavesdrop	5	≤ 7	0	8	≈ 6	0
phoney	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results	no dictionary results

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[1]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Albanian, Basque, Belarusian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Corsican, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, French, Frisian, Galician, German, Greek, Hungarian, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Luxembourgish, Macedonian, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Scots Gaelic, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Tatar, Ukrainian, Welsh, and Yiddish.

[2]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Armenian, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese Simplified, Chinese Traditional, Georgian, Gujarati, Hindi, Hmong, Japanese, Kannada, Kazakh, Khmer, Korean, Kyrgyz, Lao, Malayalam, Marathi, Mongolian, Myanmar (Burmese), Nepali, Odia, Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi, Sinhala, Tajik, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Turkish, Turkmen, Urdu, Uyghur, Uzbek, Vietnamese.

[3]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Arabic, Hebrew, Kurdish (Kurmanji), Persian.

[4]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Afrikaans, Amharic, Chichewa, Hausa, Igbo, Kinyarwanda, Sesotho, Shona, Somali, Swahili, Xhosa, Yoruba, Zulu.

[5]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Cebuano, Filipino, Hawaiian, Indonesian, Javanese, Malagasy, Malay, Maori, Samoan, Sudanese.

[6]   The languages provided by the online dictionary https://www.indifferentlanguages.com/ in this section are as follows: Esperanto, Haitian Creole, Latin.

[7]   The search for the term *trivia* produced no results, hence the related *trivial* was the subject of investigation.

6. Analysis

6.1 Semantic change motivated by metaphor: *muscle*

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (henceforth: *M-W*), the word *muscle* 'a body tissue consisting of long cells that contract when stimulated and produce motion' is etymologically related to the Latin *musculus* meaning 'little mouse.' Its first known use in English recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth: *OED*) dates back to the end of the 14th century ("1398 J. Trevisa tr. Bartholomaeus Anglicus *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (BL Add.) f. 21 Þe vertu þat hatte animalis motiva meueþ þe sinewis, muscules [L. *musculos*], brayn"). A possible reasoning here is that a flexed muscle, for example a bicep, was conceptualised by ancient Romans in terms of a rodent called mouse hidden or moving beneath the skin of an athlete. In this case, one may refer to a physical resemblance operation in which mappings are established between the source domain of ANIMAL and the target domain of OBJECT. The conceptual metaphor responsible for the semantics of *muscle* may be formalised as OBJECTS (resembling animals in appearance) ARE ANIMALS (A MUSCLE IS A MOUSE).

6.2 Semantic change motivated by metonymy: *fiasco, handicap, trivia, avocado, hazard, phon(e)y*

Available etymological sources (see the *OED*) inform us that Italian *fiasco* 'bottle, flask' is related to Late Latin *flasca, flascō* 'bottle, container', Frankish *flaska* 'bottle, flask' and Proto-Germanic **flaskǭ* 'bottle'. As the *OED* quotation shows: "The figurative use of the phrase *far fiasco* [literally: to make a bottle] in the sense 'to break down or fail in a performance' is of obscure origin". Italian etymologists have pointed to the fact that when Venetian glassblowers noticed a flaw in a glass work of art, they downgraded it into an ordinary bottle, that is a mere fiasco. In this way *fiasco* 'a downgraded work of art' acquired the extended or generic meaning 'complete failure'. This sense is evidenced by the following *OED* quotation: "1855 Ld. Lonsdale in *Croker Papers* (1884) III. xxix. 325 Derby has made what the theatrical people call a *fiasco*". It clearly shows that the word enriched the lexicon of English in the middle of the 19th century.

As far as the conceptual motivation behind the delineated changes in meaning is concerned, one may argue that the development of the literal sense 'to make a bottle' ('to produce something with a flaw') into the figurative one 'to break down or fail in a performance' is a case of general ACTION FOR ACTION metonymy, while the change of the sense 'a downgraded work of art' into the generic meaning 'complete failure' seems to result from the working of the metonymic projection OBJECT FOR RESULT OF USING THIS OBJECT. In other words, an ordinary glass bottle, being a result of a failure to produce a glass work of art, provides mental access to failure in general which seems to be an application of SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC METONYMY.

As we learn from *M-W*, the historical meaning development of the Germanic lexical item *handicap* began more than 400 years ago with a technique called *hand in cap* which was a method for exchanging items of unequal value. As part of this exchange, it was proposed that the owner of the more precious item should receive some money to make the act of bartering fair. The people involved in the exchange had to deposit money into a hat, put their hands there and then remove them either with or without money in order to show whether or not they agreed on the conditions of the deal. The earliest recorded evidence for the use of *handicap* provided by the *OED* dates from the 17th century: "1660 S. Pepys *Diary* 19 Sept. (1970) I. 248 Some of us fell to *Handycapp*, a sport that I never knew before, which was very good". One may argue that the word's original sense resulted from the working of conceptual metonymy verbalized as ACTION FOR ACTION, in which putting a hand in a cap provides mental access to a transaction associated with it.

The sense 'a race in which a designated umpire or official determines, according to the horses' known or assumed ability, what weight has to be carried by each in order to equalize their chances', which, according to the *OED*, developed in the course of the 18th century is also motivated by a metonymic projection OBJECT (WEIGHT) FOR EFFECT PRODUCED BY CARRYING IT. In turn, the more recent sense 'a disadvantage that makes achievement unusually difficult' seems to be motivated by SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC metonymy in which a specific instance of carrying extra weight by stronger horses in order to equalise their chances with weaker ones causing a specific disadvantage is generalised and understood figuratively as a disadvantage in general.

Another lexical item whose meaning development is metonymy-based is that of *trivia*. The *M-W* dictionary specifies that in ancient Rome, a *trivium* was an intersection of three roads (*tri* 'three' + *vium* 'road'). People who met at such an intersection usually discussed *trivialis*, that is 'inconsequential things'. This association of an intersection with things discussed in its vicinity led to the rise of the modern meaning of *trivia* 'unimportant matters' (*M-W*).

The word entered English quite late as the first documented use in the *OED* goes back to the first part of the 20th century ("1920 *Glasgow Herald* 21 July 8 His [*sc.* Mr. Bennett's] method suggests the amount of human interest and knowledge that may lurk in the *trivia* of holiday experience"). The conceptual motivation behind the analysed meaning development is a metonymic projection of the type OBJECT (*trivium* 'an intersection of three roads') for SOMETHING ASSOCIATED WITH THAT OBJECT (discussing *trivialis* 'inconsequential things').

The lexical item *avocado* is a modification of Spanish *aguacate*, from Nahuatl *ahuacatl*, short for *ahuacacuahuitl*, literally, 'testicle tree', from *ahuacatl* 'testicle' + *cuahuitl* 'tree'. The *M-W* dictionary points to the use of the fruit as an aphrodisiac which may have influenced its name as a fruit of a testicle tree. The first known use in the *OED* in the sense 'the fruit of a West Indian tree (*Persea*

gratissima)' goes back to the 17th century: "1697 W. Dampier *New Voy. around World* vii. 203 The *Avogato* Pear-tree is as big as most Pear-trees the Fruit as big as a large Lemon". This word is therefore a late borrowing into the lexicon of English.

As far as the conceptual motivation for the semantics of *avocado* is concerned, one may point to the working of two metonymies verbalised as WHOLE FOR PART ((testicle) tree for its fruit) and OBJECT FOR EFFECT PRODUCED BY THIS OBJECT (fruit for aphrodisiac). Since both testicles and aphrodisiacs are responsible for hormone levels and the increase of blood flow in the body, the name of the fruit originated as a metonymic reference to testicles.

Apart from *handicap*, another example of a lexeme which originated in games is *hazard.* The word dates to the time of the Crusaders and involves a game of chance. According to the *M-W*, the original *hazard* (*al-zahr*, in Arabic) was a die. Players of this game of chance would roll the dice and bet on the result. If we adopt the view that the original meaning of *al-zahr* first refers to a die and later to a game which involved the use of a die we may look for its motivation in conceptual metonymy of the type AN OBJECT FOR ACTION/A SET OF ACTIONS INVOLVING THE USE OF THIS OBJECT (a die for a game).

The English version of the word spelt *hazard* was borrowed from French at the beginning of the 14th century (see the *OED* quotation: "*c*1300 *Havelok* (Laud) (1868) l. 2326 Leyk of mine, of *hasard* ok, Romanz reding on þe bok") with the sense "a gambling game with two dice in which the chances are complicated by a number of arbitrary rules".

Further meaning development of the word is also metonymic. In the 16th English, it came to mean 'any chance, risk, or source of danger' (a sense quoted from the *M-W*) 'risk, danger, jeopardy' (a sense quoted from the *OED*). In this case the metonymic projection responsible for the rise of the new sense can be verbalised as GAME FOR RISK/DANGER RELATED TO PLAYING THIS GAME.

In contradistinction to English, Polish *hazard* 'gambling' is also metonymically related to the sense 'game'; however, the metonymic projection highlights the act of playing for stakes in the hope of winning rather than the risk involved. The metonymy which motivates this sense seems to have the form: GAME FOR THE ACT OF PLAYING.

Yet another interesting example of metonymic motivation for semantic change involves the rise of the figurative meaning of *phony* whose original sense was related to something that glittered but was not gold. The development of the literal sense is based on an old British scam described by the *M-W* in the following way: "A con man would gild a brass ring to disguise it as gold, surreptitiously drop it, and then run to pick it up at the same time that an unsuspecting passerby noticed it on the ground. The scammer would then propose that the found treasure should be split between them. The one who'd "found" the ring, convinced now of its

value, would choose instead to keep the ring and pay the con artist some amount of money. That amount, of course, was a bargain for gold but a high price for brass"[8] This gilded brass ring to be mistaken for a fake gold ring started to be called the *fawney*, later respelled as *phony*. The literal sense seems to be motivated by the OBJECT FOR OBJECT metonymy, while the figurative sense 'fake, sham, counterfeit' results from the SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC metonymy (a fake ring for anything that is not genuine or authentic). The first attestation of the figurative sense goes back to the end of the 19th century (the *OED:* "1893 *Chicago Tribune* 29 June 6/2 Many of the 'phony' bookmakers in the ring had not enough play to keep them alive").

6.3 Semantic change motivated by metonymic chains: *eavesdrop, bedlam, slapstick*

As confirmed by the *OED*, the word *eavesdrop* is of Germanic origin. The Old English *yfesdrype*, was a combination of two nouns *eaves* 'the edge of the roof of a building' and the obsolete *drip* 'a falling drop', later respelled as the noun *drop* 'a globule of liquid'. The first attested *OED* quotation goes back to the 9th century ("868 *Kentish Charter* in *Brit. Museum Fac-Sim.* ii. plate xxxviii An folcæs folcryht to lefænne rumæs butan twigen fyt to yfæs drypæ"). As the senses of the nouns forming the compound *eavesdrop* may suggest, originally this word had nothing to do with its present-day figurative meaning, that is 'to listen secretly to what other people are saying' (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*). It was first used as a noun and, as evidenced by *M-W*, it referred to 'the water that fell from the eaves of a house,' then it came to mean 'the ground where that water fell'. This change of meaning might be interpreted as resulting from the working of the conceptual metonymy SUBSTANCE FOR PLACE.

In turn, the original meaning provided by the *OED* refers to the action of 'dripping of water from the eaves of a house'. The subsequent sense is expressed in a likewise manner, that is 'the space of ground which is liable to receive the rainwater thrown off by the eaves of a building.' In this respect, we might look for the motivation behind the sense change in the conceptual metonymy ACTION FOR PLACE. Now, in the case of the figurative sense 'to stand within the 'eavesdrop' of a house in order to listen to secrets', one may notice the metonymic projection PLACE FOR ACTION. Finally, the current meaning 'to listen secretly to what is said in private' may result from the working of the conceptual metonymy SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC. This complex development of meaning can, therefore, be accounted for by reference to the metonymic chain SUBSTANCE or ACTION FOR PLACE FOR ACTION FOR (GENERIC) ACTION. In other words, water falling from the eaves of a house, or the act of dripping of water from the eaves of

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[8]   Retrieved   from   https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/top-10-words-with-remarkable-origins-vol-1.

a house, provides mental access to the associated place which, in turn, provides access to the action of standing within the 'eavesdrop' of a house in order to listen to secrets and finally the more generic action of listening secretly to what is said in private.

Let us now consider another example of a term whose semantic development was conditioned by chained metonymy. The *Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem* was the first asylum for the mentally ill in England. In the 16th century, one of the component words from the name of the hospital, *Bethlehem*, was respelled and used elliptically in the form *Bedlam* with reference to this institution. The following quotation from the *OED* confirms the first use of this form: "1528 W. TYNDALE *Obed. Christen Man* f. xxxvj For they doo thinges which they of Bedlem maye se, that they are but madnes". At the same time, the metonymic projection PLACE FOR PERSON ASSOCIATED WITH THAT PLACE led to the rise of the sense 'inmates' of this asylum associated with the word *bedlams*. Further meaning development is also metonymically conditioned.

By the late 17th century, *bedlam* started to be used in the sense 'a scene of wild uproar or confusion' motivated by the conceptual metonymy PERSON FOR EVENT. This sense emerged when, as argued by Flavell and Flavell (1993, p. 44), "during the eighteenth century, for a small entrance fee, visitors were admitted to ogle and jeer at the inmates, chained in their cells. Such sport was disruptive and noisy bouts of disorder must have been commonly witnessed, so that *bedlam* came to be used figuratively to describe scenes of commotion and uproar". Therefore, the semantic development of *bedlam* seems to be motivated by the metonymic chain PLACE FOR PERSON FOR EVENT.

According to *M-W*, the reason why physical comedies were often described as *slapstick* is that original *slapsticks* 'sticks used for slapping' were used by the comedians of 16th century Italy. The *OED* defines the word as 'two flat pieces of wood joined together at one end, used to produce a loud slapping noise; specifically, such a device used in pantomime and low comedy to make a great noise with the pretence of dealing a heavy blow.' It was documented for the first time in the *OED* towards the end of the 19th century: "1896 *N.Y. Dramatic News* 4 July 9/3 What a relief, truly, from the slap-sticks, rough-and-tumble comedy couples abounding in the variety ranks".

The conceptual motivation behind the original sense of the word seems to result from the activation of conceptual metonymy verbalised as OBJECT FOR INSTRUMENT (used for making a noise imitating a blow). Metonymic projection is also responsible for the emergence of a later sense defined by the *M-W* dictionary as 'comedy that depends for its effect on fast, boisterous, and zany physical activity and horseplay (such as the throwing of pies, the whacking of posteriors with a slapstick, chases, mugging)'. Its first attestation provided by the *OED* dates back to the beginning of the 20th century ("1926 *Amer. Speech* **1** 437/2 *Slap-stick*, low

comedy in its simplest form. Named from the double paddles formerly used by circus clowns to beat each other"). The metonymic projection alluded to above may be formalised as OBJECT/INSTRUMENT FOR EVENT (in which this object or something associated with this object is used). Consequently, the changes which characterise the semantic evolution of *slapstick* may be said to result from the activation of the metonymic chain OBJECT FOR INSTRUMENT FOR EVENT.

7. Concluding remarks

I hope to have managed to show that the conceptual motivation for the semantics of the "top" ten terms analysed in this paper should be sought in the activation of conceptual metaphor and metonymy. As the conducted analysis shows, the lexical items under scrutiny may be divided into three groups according to the mechanisms that motivated the creation of their meanings. The research proves that it is mainly conceptual metonymy that accounts for the semantic motivation of the targeted lexical items. Thus, it turns out that conceptual metonymy is the mechanism that played a substantial role in the development of the meaning of *trivia*, *hazard* and *phony* in which single metonymic projections may be identified. The conceptual metonymies that lead to the rise of individual senses include, among others, OBJECT FOR SOMETHING/ACTION ASSOCIATED WITH THIS OBJECT (*hazard, trivia*) or OBJECT FOR OBJECT (*phony*).

   The semantic development of some of the analysed terms seems to be motivated by the working of groups of consecutive metonymies exemplified by OBJECT FOR RESULT OF USING THIS OBJECT, ACTION FOR ACTION, SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC in the case of *fiasco*, WHOLE FOR PART and OBJECT FOR EFFECT PRODUCED BY THIS OBJECT (*avocado*), ACTION FOR ACTION, OBJECT (WEIGHT) FOR EFFECT PRODUCED BY CARRYING IT (*handicap*), AN OBJECT FOR ACTION/A SET OF ACTIONS INVOLVING THE USE OF THIS OBJECT, GAME FOR RISK/DANGER RELATED TO PLAYING THIS GAME (*hazard*) and a number of metonymic chains responsible for sense shifts in other targeted terms – OBJECT FOR ACTION FOR PLACE FOR ACTION FOR ANOTHER ACTION (*eavesdrop*), OBJECT FOR INSTRUMENT FOR EVENT (*slapstick*), PLACE FOR PERSON FOR EVENT (*bedlam*). One of the analysed terms, that of *muscle*, seems to be the result of the activation of conceptual metaphor based on physical resemblance OBJECTS ARE ANIMALS.

   The paper is a pilot study indicating an interesting area of research and as such it does not aspire to cover a number of issues which still remain as potential scope for future research. One of the areas worth investigating might be the question of why some of the figurative terms subject to analysis are so commonly employed, not only in English but also in other languages, to the extent that – at least some of them – may be argued to have acquired near-universal status in a cross-linguistic perspective. As far as future research is concerned, it would also be interesting to

explore whether the terms used in different languages as shown in Table 3 have developed related or distant senses. In this respect, it would be useful to analyse the cultural models that seem to explicate both the similarities and differences in the conceptualizations of the analysed terms.

My findings indicate that some of the analysed lexical items (*fiasco, avocado, trivia, handicap* and *hazard*) may be said to have acquired a nearly universal cross-linguistic status, at least in European cultures. They are deeply entrenched and culture-bound terms and therefore the conceptual metonymies they embody seem to exert a strong impact on social cognition. From this it follows that one should therefore emphasise the role of embodiment and cognition in meaning construal. Being inspired by Kövecses (2017a, p. 215), I believe that the working of conceptual metaphor and metonymy may be evidenced at all levels of linguistic description, while their "important contribution to connecting mind with the body, language with culture, body with culture, and language with the brain" cannot be underestimated.

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