Sex-Related Euphemism and Dysphemism:
An Analysis in Terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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It is my purpose in this paper to draw attention to the euphemistic and dysphemistic figurative language used to designate the taboo of sex in the frame of the well-known Conceptual Metaphor Theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson. From this standpoint, I claim that conceptualization plays a crucial role in both the use and interpretation of sexual metaphorical euphemisms and dysphemisms. In this regard, I consider the implications and effects of the process of lexicalization in conceptual categorization, particularly concerning the directionality of metaphorical projections. I also analyse the function of conceptual metaphors in euphemistic and dysphemistic use, seeking to study the way in which a particular experiential domain is more likely to give rise to verbal mitigation or offence, and I finally trace how a given conceptualization accounts for the interpretation of sex-related euphemistic and dysphemistic metaphors. The analysis undertaken shows that metaphorical terms and phrases referring to sexual taboos can be insightfully described in terms of Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive view of metaphor.

Keywords: Cognitive Semantics, conceptual metaphor, euphemism, dysphemism, referent manipulation, sexual taboo.

1. Introduction

As usually happens with most things dangerous or censored, taboos are somehow tempting and fascinating for us.[1] Judging from the endless series of mild and abusive references to forbidden concepts, it seems obvious that taboo is not indifferent to

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human beings.[2] As Burridge puts it, "what is taboo is revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling – but above all powerful" (2004: 199). This power of taboo keeps language users from avoiding the forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it. To this end, they resort respectively either to euphemism (i.e. the semantic or formal process by which the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones) or to dysphemism (i.e. the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself). This ambivalence towards taboo seems to be especially noteworthy in the case of sex, an area of interdiction particularly fruitful in lexical generation. Indeed, sex is pervasive in everyday life, which, as could not be otherwise, is reflected in the tremendously high degree of synonymy in the English vocabulary for genitalia and copulation.[3]

Given that metaphorization stands out as the most prolific linguistic device of lexical creativity, it is hardly surprising that speakers turn to figurative language as a means of coping with the realm of sex. Clearly, metaphor plays a crucial role in the manipulation of the taboo referent insofar as it is at the user's disposal to model the distasteful concept and present it without its pejorative overtones or, by contrast, with an intensification of its most unacceptable conceptual traits.[4] In this regard, as metaphor stands out as a major device in structuring sexual euphemism and dysphemism conceptually, the main concern of this paper is to demonstrate that sex-related euphemisms and dysphemisms are based on underlying metaphor systems within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT) initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). This seems to prove a worthy enterprise, because whilst there is a substantial body of research on the metaphorical conceptualization of the taboo of sex (Lakoff 1987; Pfaff, Gibbs and Johnson 1997; Murphy 2001, among others), to the best of my knowledge relatively little attention has been paid to conceptual metaphor as a purely euphemistic or dysphemistic device. With this in view, and granted that euphemisms and dysphemisms are highly dependent on context, my study is not based on isolated words, but on coherent and contextualized discourses extracted, unless otherwise stated, from literary texts and from *The British National Corpus* (hereafter BNC).

This paper is structured as follows. After providing the theoretical framework of CMT in which my study is embedded, I first deal with the effects of the process of lexicalization in sexual conceptualization, particularly concerning the bidirectionality of metaphorical projections. Next, I proceed to analyse the function of conceptual

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[2] I understand by *taboo* the prohibition of certain kinds of behaviour or objects believed to be harmful either for moral, religious or social reasons, whereas the *linguistic taboo* is the word or phrase to be avoided in public discourse because of the restrictions imposed by taboos.

[3] According to Allan and Burridge (1991: 96), there exist approximately 1,200 terms for *vagina*, 1,000 for *penis* and 800 for *copulation*.

[4] I understand by *referent manipulation* the process whereby the language user presents the taboo referent in a particular way, either softening its less acceptable aspects or, by contrast, intensifying them. It seems obvious that the concept is not modified whatsoever, though it is manipulated by the speaker, and the result of this manipulation is what the receiver notices. For a detailed description of this process, see Crespo Fernández (2007).

metaphors in euphemistic and dysphemistic reference, seeking to study the way in which a particular experiential domain is more likely to give rise to verbal mitigation or offence. I then move on to the interpretation of euphemistic and dysphemistic conceptual metaphors referring to sexual topics. A summary of the results obtained will bring this study to an end.

2. Theoretical assumptions. The cognitive approach

The theoretical assumptions on which the present paper is based are derived from the well-known CMT initially developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In its broadest sense, the cognitive approach claims that metaphor is a device with the capacity to structure our conceptual system, providing, at the same time, a particular understanding of the world and a way to make sense of our experience. From this standpoint, metaphor is defined as "a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system" (Lakoff 1994: 203); that is, a mapping or set of conceptual correspondences from a source domain (the realm of the physical or more concrete reality) to a target domain (the taboo of sex, in this case). A good case in point is the conceptual metaphor A MALE HOMOSEXUAL IS A FLOWER, in which the mapping projects attributes of the source domain (delicateness, softness, etc.) onto the taboo target domain of homosexuality. It is precisely in this correspondence between the source and the target domains that conceptualization fulfils its euphemistic or dysphemistic function, as will be explained later on. Therefore, within the cognitive tradition, there is no question that metaphor enables language users to delimit and reify abstract concepts in particular terms and, rather than as a matter of language, it should be considered as a mode of thought and reason, as Lakoff (1994: 208) points out.

As certain values are given priority in the metaphorical structuring of a given concept (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 10), the filter of metaphorical conceptualization through which reality is presented provides us with a partial understanding of the concept, masking or revealing particular aspects of the topic being dealt with, a process which makes conceptual metaphors readily accessible for euphemistic or dysphemistic reference respectively. When giving priority to some value systems over others, socio-cultural considerations play a crucial role; indeed, Langacker (1997: 241) claims that cognitive and cultural considerations are so closely connected that metaphor stands out as the main device in cultural construction. In fact, our conception of the target domain as expressed in a source-domain pairing is grounded in our knowledge and experience of how the reality expressed by the source domain is culturally understood.

The role of the receiver in CMT cannot be obviously left aside. The conceptual representation of abstract concepts is an active process in which both the speaker and the receiver are involved. In this regard, Indurkhya emphasizes the active role of the human mind in the process of finding similarities and associations between two entities: "The world we see in our mind's eye is a world that is not 'given' but is constructed by our cognitive apparatus.... the conceptual organization of the world is brought about by an interaction between the cognitive agent and the environment, a process in which each participant is actively involved" (1992: 111). In this sense, the

meaning conveyed by a given conceptualization does not precede the metaphor; rather, it is produced by the interpretative process in which the creative response from a competent reader is, as Black (1979) suggests, what allows us to see one object in terms of another. Hence, the process of finding similarities between entities and the assignment of the mitigating or pejorative traits to a term or expression is subject to the active and cooperative role on the part of the hearer to unravel the possible meanings of the utterance, a process which largely depends on the restrictions, beliefs and social behaviour of the participants in the verbal exchange (see Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 1994: 85).

3. The effect of lexicalization in sexual conceptual metaphors

The euphemistic or dysphemistic conceptual categorization of sexual taboos is greatly influenced by the degree of lexicalization of the linguistic substitute, that is, the extent to which the tabooed conceptual traits have become associated with the euphemistic or dysphemistic metaphorical alternative. In this respect, Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000: 68-70) distinguish three types of euphemisms and dysphemisms according to their degree of lexicalization: *lexicalized* (those in which the figurative meaning is regarded as the normal or literal meaning); *semi-lexicalized* (the substitute is associated with the taboo because of its inclusion in a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the forbidden concept); and *creative* (the euphemistic or dysphemistic item is the result of a novel association with the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context).[5] The degree of lexicalization of metaphorical units plays a crucial role in conceptual categorization, as explained in what follows.

Semi-lexicalized and creative metaphors suit the purpose of framing the taboo topic in a particular conceptual sphere, which considerably determines the perception of the taboo topic being dealt with and suits the purpose of euphemism and dysphemism particularly well. In either case, the transfer of semantic components from the source to the target domain typical of cognitive association determines how the concept is dealt with and reflects the speaker's intention to be respectful or offensive. Consider the following examples included in the semi-lexicalized metaphor SEX IS EATING:[6]

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[5] As metaphors are so closely connected with euphemisms and dysphemisms, Chamizo Domínguez (1998: 47-70) had already applied these categories to metaphorical language, distinguishing three types of metaphors: *lexicalized*, *semi-lexicalized* and *new* or *creative* metaphors. In the same vein, I proposed a typology of metaphorical euphemism in a previous study, establishing four types of euphemisms according to their degree of association with the taboo and mitigating capacity, namely *explicit, conventional, novel* and *artful* euphemisms (Crespo Fernández 2006: 32-34).

[6] Eating and food are common sources for naming sexual organs and sex-related actions. Allan and Burridge (2006: 190) argue that the close association between the alimentary and the sexual can be explained on the basis that "food is often the prelude to sex .... Eating and love-making go together". This link between eating and sex has an obvious influence at the linguistic level; indeed, the food/eating metaphor for sex is pervasive in our ordinary language and throughout the history of English slang (for examples on the symbolic value of the food and eating vocabulary, see Hines 2000; Allan and Burridge 2006: 194-97; Kövecses 2006: 155-56).

(1) Selfishness on the part of the man demands that the wife submit to his sexual desires.... He is somewhat like a hungry man, who sits down at the table to *eat his meal*.[7] (Stoll 1996)

(2) Slim in her dungarees, with her long, curly, chestnut hair and wide-eyed enthusiasm, some would tell you Marcia was a little *cookie*. (BNC APC 1007)

The new semantic categorization of the taboo provided by semi-lexicalized metaphorical alternatives leads to particular ways of understanding the topics referred to. Indeed, to verbalize sexual referents via the conceptual metaphor SEX IS EATING implies to understand the sexual taboo in terms of a different domain: food, or, more precisely, as Kövecses (2006: 156) points out, appetizing food.[8] This particular association provides the language user with different lexical alternatives from this source domain such as *eat his meal* in (1) and *cookie* in (2) in the designation of the taboo referents 'copulate' and 'promiscuous female' respectively. These metaphorical items are both interpreted in terms of the same conceptual association, though the motivation and the resulting lexical realization of the conceptual association is radically different: the euphemistic alternative *eat his meal* provides a socially acceptable way of dealing with the taboo of copulation, whereas the dysphemistic term *cookie* implies that women are simply sex objects to be enjoyed or eaten. In fact, words like *cookie* or *cheesecake*, says Hines, are included in a conceptualization equating women-as-sex-objects with desserts that "reduces women to the status of objects, with the attendant implications of powerlessness, inanimacy and procurability" (2000: 146). Such implications of this metaphor provide the basis for the dysphemistic reference to women.

The semi-lexicalized metaphors discussed in the preceding paragraph provide a particular understanding of the sexual taboo within the conceptual system of our culture. There are, however, metaphorical networks which offer a non-conventional approach to the target domain, leading to creative metaphorical items which resort to the novelty in the reference to the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context, to provide a fresh insight (either mitigating or offensive) into the taboo. A case in point is the conceptualization AN ORGASM IS A BAPTISM, extracted from D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*:

(3) Their coming together now, after two years of married life ... was the *baptism to another life*, it was complete confirmation. (Lawrence 1986: 95)

The consideration of an orgasm in terms of a baptism does not respond to pre-existing metaphorical associations in the reader's cognitive system, but derives from Lawrence's personal view of sexuality and the particular associations that the novelist creates between both concepts, masking the physical aspects of an orgasm and highlighting its spiritual side. This metaphorical equation arises from the beliefs concerning a baptism

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[7] Hereafter, the metaphorical items that I want to highlight in the examples will appear in italics.

[8] The conceptualization of women as appetizing food combines with other food-related metaphors for sex such as WOMEN ARE DESSERTS (Hines 2000), SEX IS EATING, THE OBJECT OF SEX IS FOOD and SEXUAL DESIRE IS HUNGER (Kövecses 2006).

as the entry into a new life to conceptualize an orgasm, which leads to the hyperbolic artful euphemism *baptism to another life.*[9]

So far we have seen that both semi-lexicalized and creative metaphors can suit the purpose of euphemism and dysphemism by conceptualizing a given reality in particular terms within a cognitive network. However, this is not the case with lexicalized metaphors, those in which the second order or figurative meaning becomes the norm in the speech community and are thus felt to have lost their metaphorical status. Indeed, a coarse word like *cock*, whose original meaning was 'adult male chicken' and its use with a sexual sense ('penis') first appeared in the early seventeenth century (*OED2*), has picked up sexual connotations as a consequence of its frequent use in the reference to the sexual male organ over the years.[10] This word has reached the last stage in the process of lexicalization of metaphorical units commented above, after which the word or expression is deprived of its capacity to refer figuratively or euphemistically to the taboo due to its intimate association – not to say identification – with the sexual concept that it names. Take the example that follows:

> (4) I'm going to see a wee lassie tonight; maybe she's not as pretty as Helen, but after I have a word with her, then maybe, just maybe, she'll let you put that *cock* of yours into action. (BNC BN3 756)

The lexicalized metaphorical term *cock* does not offer an alternative way of comprehending reality. In fact, granted that nobody would think of a connection of *cock* with a male domestic fowl in the example above, this word is unable to frame the taboo topic in a particular conceptual sphere and consequently does not provide a particular way of understanding the sexual concept. The term does provide a way to refer to the tabooed body part in a colloquial register like that of (4), but not to reason about it, as happens in conceptual categorization. Given that the sexual sense of the word has overlapped its axiologically neuter meaning, the once euphemistic term is inevitably linked to the sexual taboo.

The considerations stated in the preceding paragraphs lead me to reflect on one of the basic aspects of the standard CMT approach, the principle of unidirectionality, according to which the associative process goes from the more abstract concept to the more concrete reality. That this is so can be gathered from Barcelona (2003: 214): "... according to the standard cognitive theory of metaphor and metonymy (CTMM), mapping in metaphor is always *unidirectional*: only the source is projected onto the target domain, and the target domain is not at the same time mapped onto the source domain. Therefore, simultaneous *bidirectional* metaphorical projections do not exist in this theory"(emphasis in the original). Nonetheless, I tend to believe that not always are metaphorical projections unidirectional: when focusing on the use in communication

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[9] I understand by *artful euphemism* the modality of verbal mitigation in which the euphemistic disguise relies on ambiguous and connotative language. For further information about this euphemistic category, see Crespo Fernández (2007: 147-50).

[10] *OED2* reports that the cock metaphor for 'penis' does not come directly from the domestic fowl, but from a barrel tap in the shape of a cock's nest. In this sense, as Murphy (2001: 20-21) argues, the penis is characterized as a mechanical device engineered to pour liquids and can thus be included in the sex-as-machine conceptual equation.

of certain lexicalized linguistic realizations of a given conceptual metaphor, the mapping of knowledge from the source domain onto the target domain can be somehow considered as *bidirectional*. In fact, the initial projection from the source onto the taboo target domain may be reversed as a consequence of the continuous use of the metaphorical units that arise from a sex-related conceptualization. As a result, the more abstract or 'innocent' domain may become contaminated because of its connection with the reality expressed by the source domain and may be ultimately felt as part of the taboo target domain. Consider the term *come* below:

(5)   When I think I'm going to *come*, I pull out, pull the rubber off and ejaculate over the girl's chest. (BNC CGB 2014)

(6)   CRESSIDA... My lord, *come* you into my chamber: you smile and mock at me as if I meant naughtily.
      TROILUS. Ha, ha!
      CRESSIDA. *Come*, you are deceived, I think of no such thing. (Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, IV. ii. 36-39)

Through the conceptual metaphor AN ORGASM IS THE END OF A JOURNEY, in (5) the sexual climax is seen in terms of the end-point of a journey, as the unidirectional property of cognitive association maintains. Here, by virtue of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL Schema into which our everyday experience may be organized (Lakoff 1987: 275), a sexual encounter is understood as a process with a starting, an end point and a time span. This, in turn, implies that an orgasm is conceptualized as the final stage of the sexual encounter, the end-point of the journey. Hence, the source domain of journeys is used not only to verbalize the target domain of sex, but also to reason about it in terms of a different domain of experience. However, in (6) this set of conceptual correspondences is reversed in the process of interpretation by mapping knowledge about journeys onto knowledge about a reality from the realm of sex. From this perspective, it is therefore likely that the end of a journey, as expressed by the source domain in the initial correspondence of the source-target pairing, acquires sexual overtones, given that its interpretation in the Shakespearean example is the result of the lexicalization of the term with a sexual sense.[11] The tension between the literal and the euphemistic meaning that *come* had in Shakespeare's times, lends itself to humorous effects.

From this it can be deduced that using metaphors with a lexicalized sexual meaning in discourse does not only involve a projection from the source domain onto the target domain, since the target domain may also be projected onto the source domain. As in *come*, the tabooed conceptual traits have progressively become an integral part in the reference of the word, the sexual taboo will be activated, either consciously or not, in the interpretation of such a term. This seems to confirm Levin's position on the subject: "As far as metaphor in general is concerned, it is just as possible for one term of the comparison to modify the other as it is for the reverse procedure to take place" (1979:

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[11] This metaphorical interpretation provides the basis for considering *come* in (6) an asymmetric metaphor, as the hearer interprets the word metaphorically though there is no metaphorical intention on the part of the speaker (Goatly 1997: 128).

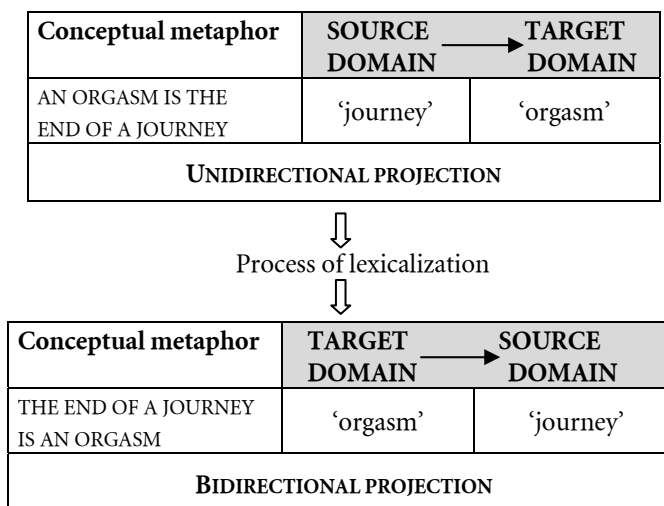128). This process of bidirectionality in lexicalized conceptual metaphors is graphically shown in figure 1:

Conceptual metaphor	SOURCE DOMAIN ⟶	TARGET DOMAIN
AN ORGASM IS THE END OF A JOURNEY	'journey'	'orgasm'
UNIDIRECTIONAL PROJECTION		

⇓

Process of lexicalization

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Conceptual metaphor	TARGET DOMAIN ⟶	SOURCE DOMAIN
THE END OF A JOURNEY IS AN ORGASM	'orgasm'	'journey'
BIDIRECTIONAL PROJECTION		

Figure 1: The bidirectional projection of lexicalized metaphors

As shown in figure 1, there seem to be two cognitive networks at play in the conceptualizations in which *come* is included, namely AN ORGASM IS THE END OF A JOURNEY and THE END OF A JOURNEY IS AN ORGASM, in both the choice and understanding of the sexual issue. By virtue of the process of lexicalization undergone by *come*, the initial projection from the source domain of journeys onto the taboo target domain of sex − i.e. the principle of unidirectionaly already commented on − may be extended to a metaphorical projection from the target to the source domains, giving way to a redescription of the latter in terms of the sexual connotations evoked by the former.[12]

An example such as (6) provides evidence for the assumption that metaphorical terms lexicalized with a sexual meaning create the basis in CMT for seeing aspects of reality that they themselves help to constitute, activating new semantic connotations of metaphorical units. This constitutes a basic tenet in the Interactive Theory developed by Black (1962 and 1979), which sees metaphor as an intellectual operation with a cognitive import in which the creative response from the receiver allows for a redefinition of the *frame*, in Black's terminology (or *source domain* in CMT), as a result of the system of associated commonplaces (i.e. standard beliefs and opinions shared by the members of a community) spontaneously evoked by the *focus* (or *target domain*): "The metaphorical utterance works by 'projecting upon' the primary subject a set of

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[12] However, as an anonymous referee correctly observes, bidirectionality in metaphors is not exclusive of metaphors based on sex. For instance, the terms *cat* and *catty* applied to women's behavior or *chicken* to refer to fearful people may acquire connotations that, in some contexts, carry over to the non-metaphorical referents (cats have malice, chicken are fearful).

'associated implications', comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject" (Black 1979: 28). These associated implications which allow us to create new senses are derived from the association of the source domain with the sexual taboo. Thus, some lexicalized metaphors create similarities that previously were not known to exist.

In sum, the process of lexicalization contributes to modifying our conception of the reality expressed by the source domain and allows us to see new aspects of an entity in terms of the target domain. By saying this, I do not challenge the principle of unidirectionality in the mapping of metaphor within the model of CMT; rather, I believe that the source is not projected onto the target domain on all occasions, as the principle of unidirectionality maintains, since in lexicalized metaphors the target domain may be mapped onto the source domain. From this viewpoint, bidirectional metaphorical projections could be admitted in CMT.

4. Conceptualization in euphemistic and dysphemistic use

As discussed earlier, it seems evident that sexual taboos can be analysed and shaped in terms of conceptual metaphors. Metaphorical language structures the use of the taboo areas and establishes how cognitive domains and mappings determine the mitigating or offensive value of the metaphorical alternative. Granted that a sex-related target concept can be expressed via different source domains (see Kövecses 2003: 79), the particular connotations of the source domain used to refer to the target concept largely influence the euphemistic force of the metaphorical substitute or, by contrast, its pejorative load. A significant example is the taboo 'copulate', subject to different conceptualizations via the metaphorical equations SEX IS WAR, TO COPULATE IS HORSE-RIDING and SEX IS WORK in the examples that follow:

(7) HOSTESS: ... he *stabbed* me in mine own house, and that most beastly. In good faith, a cares not what mischief he does, if his weapon be out, he will foin like any devil. (Shakespeare, *2 Henry IV*, II. i. 14-16)

(8) It is just likely that she will allow one male after another to *mount* her until her whole circle of admirers has been accommodated. (BNC BMG 1032)

(9) I remember the first time we went to bed and *did the business*. (BNC CGC 1671)

The type of source domain in the mappings above determines the euphemistic or dysphemistic nature of the lexical substitute for the taboo of copulation. In (7), *stab* is included in the metaphor SEX IS WAR, a cognitive association which transfers different attributes from the source domain of war to the target domain of sex. More specifically, it presents different sets of ontological correspondences as a result of using the knowledge we have about war to talk about the taboo of sex; for instance, the lover is the enemy, to seduce the sexual partner is to overcome an enemy, the penis is a weapon, etc. The conceptual basis for war metaphors responds to an overall view of sex in terms of hostility, violence and dominance (see Beneke 1982); accordingly, many of the metaphorical substitutes that fall under this cognitive equation tend to acquire dysphemistic overtones. Similarly, the sex-as-horse-riding metaphor in (8) implies that

the woman is referred to as the horse, while her sexual partner is the rider who 'mounts' her. This equine imagery constitutes a good source domain for the expression of disrespect toward women, who are depicted as less than human, and confers on the man a position of control and dominance over the female sexual partner.

Nonetheless, to resort to a more neutral conceptual metaphor which refers to a non-violent source domain like work by means of the mild phrase *did the business* in (9) no doubt facilitates the mitigation of the taboo and the possibility of using it safely in public discourse. In this conceptualization, the connotations of such items as *work on* 'copulate with' or *the job* 'sexual intercourse' are far from the violent overtones of the metaphorical alternatives included in the sex-as-war conceptual network, which clearly favours their use to target the sexual issue euphemistically. Despite its mitigating force, Murphy considers that the metaphor SEX IS WORK implicitly degrades the sexual act itself on the basis that "men view their relationships with women through the lens of control, discipline, regulation and commodity. Men's reduction of their sexuality to work, business, and an economic exchange embraces their relations to women as part of the male economy" (2001: 41). Indeed, the connection between sex and work reduces sex to an exchange devoid of intimacy and affection and contributes to portraying women as inferior.

Another case that is worth mentioning is the taboo 'prostitute', that can be conceptualized differently through the euphemistic conceptual metaphor A PROSTITUTE IS A WORKER or via the intrinsically dysphemistic network A PROSTITUTE IS AN ANIMAL. Indeed, the kind of source domain determines the euphemistic or dysphemistic nature of the resulting conceptual metaphor, as pointed out before. In the first case, the conceptual basis lies in the fact that prostitution is perceived in strictly commercial terms, as a job like any other, in line with the metaphor which understands sex in terms of work and labour; for this reason, metaphorization gives rise to socially acceptable alternatives such as *business woman*, *working girl* or *sex worker*, as recorded by Holder (2003). In the case of A PROSTITUTE IS AN ANIMAL, however, the conceptual association cannot be said to offer any sort of amelioration to the taboo referent; instead, this conceptualization generates undeviating terms of abuse from the animal vocabulary that dehumanize prostitutes in some way and undermine their social and personal status (see Fernández de la Torre and Sánchez Benedito 1999).[13] By way of illustration, take the following example:

> (10) Watching, Jess was reminded of a pack of *alley cats* he'd seen at the rear of Samson's
> smithy one night. (BNC C85 3241)

In (10) the animal metaphor is based on the similarity between a stray cat that frequents alleys in search of food and a prostitute seeking customers. In addition, this metaphor alludes to the mating habits of female cats and therefore suggests that prostitutes act out of carnal lust. In this sense, by analogy to a freewheeling feline, there is a mapping of

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[13] Several studies have analysed the multiplicity of animal-based metaphors depicting women as objects of sexual abuse and denigration in different languages. Among them, those by Baider and Gesuato (2003) in French and Italian; Fernández Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán (2003) in English and Spanish; and Chamizo Domínguez and Zawislawska (2006) in Spanish and Polish.

negatively evaluated animal attributes onto the human referent. It must be noted that an animal metaphor such as this involves semantic derogation at the levels of both the speaker and the receiver. In fact, by referring to a prostitute as a stray cat, the speaker, either consciously or not, evokes the standard set of beliefs associated with the animal to understand human character in terms of animal behaviour (Black 1962: 50); in the same vein, the receiver is aware that attributes of a negative nature are commonly associated with animals, which constitutes the basis for the dysphemistic interpretation of the metaphorical utterance.

However, a conceptual metaphor is not usually limited to either evasive or abusive references to sexual taboos. Indeed, the same mapping may have both euphemistic and dysphemistic realizations. In such a case, the intention of the speaker to be respectful or offensive will be largely responsible for the positive or negative attributes to be transferred from a given source domain to the target domain of sex. This happens in the conceptual equation SEX IS EATING, which gives rise both to metaphorical phrases with euphemistic overtones such as *eat one's meal* and to dysphemistic references like *cookie*, as illustrated in (1) and (2), above, respectively. The purpose of the language user is radically different in each case: whereas in (1) the speaker attempts to be respectful towards the interlocutor and/or to the concept itself by alluding to sexual intercourse in a socially acceptable way, the image conveyed by *cookie* is that of women as things for sexual use, as inferior and accessible sexual objects, undermining their status as human beings, in line with the conceptual metaphor A PROSTITUTE IS AN ANIMAL seen above.

5. Interpretation of sex-related conceptual metaphors

Not only does conceptualization play a significant role in the speaker's euphemistic or dysphemistic choice, but, as could not be otherwise, it also has an obvious effect on the understanding of the metaphorical substitute, a process in which the receiver's role must by no means be underestimated. Indeed, the associative links between the metaphorical item and the taboo require an active participation on the part of the receiver, who is expected to identify an alternative and novel meaning in the designation of the forbidden concept and, in so doing, go beyond the literal meaning and arrive at the speaker's intention to be respectful or offensive. Otherwise, a literal understanding of metaphors would impede effective communication because, after all, euphemism and dysphemism must necessarily be ambiguous in order to carry out their communicative function.

It is precisely thanks to the intrinsic uncertainty of metaphor with regard to the application of the word to a denotatum that metaphorical euphemism and dysphemism are able to suggest that there is a distasteful concept underneath the signifier (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000: 40-41). The metaphorical phrase *eat one's meal* in (1) commented on earlier is ambiguous, meaning something different in relation to food from what it means in relation to sex ('copulate'). This implies that the literal meaning does not actually correspond with the meaning intended by the speaker in that context, and enables the interlocutor to opt for a plausible interpretation beyond the denotation of the signifier. According to this view, I tend to believe that not only is

ambiguity the raw material of euphemism, as Teso Martín (1998: 199) claims, but that the ambiguity intrinsically attached to metaphor also moves to dysphemism and compels the receiver to process at the metaphorical level and understand *cookie* in (2) with the figurative sense of 'promiscuous female'. In sum, in euphemism as well as in dysphemism, it is the intentional and deliberate ambiguity of metaphors that leads the receiver to explore beyond the literal meaning and arrive at the connotations hidden under the metaphorical disguise.

In this process of detection of metaphorical meaning, the nature and particular connotations of a given conceptualization determine the perception of the metaphorical substitute in terms of a euphemism or a dysphemism and, in this way, contribute to the process of disambiguation of sexual metaphorical items.[14] A good example is the conceptualization SEX IS WAR mentioned before, a metaphor that constitutes the source of a remarkable diversity of sex-related vocabulary, as shown by Sánchez Benedito (2004: 186-92). As a consequence of this conceptualization of sex in terms of violence – a tradition which dates back to Elizabethan literature (see Partridge 1968: 23) – our understanding of the metaphorical substitutes included in this mapping is inevitably shaped by preexisting metaphorical associations deriving from the sex-as-violence metaphor which form part of the hearer's cognitive system (see Lakoff 1994: 210). Because of this immediate identification of sex with violence, the taboo target domain is easier to comprehend – although its nature is radically different from that of the source domain – and, therefore, it automatically activates the dysphemistic reference of the source domain in a given communicative context. Indeed, a dysphemistic interpretation of a metaphorical term or phrase within this conceptual domain seems reasonable and plausible. Consider the following example:

> (11) When finally he grabbed the ropes which secured her, and *shot his load* deep inside her pulsing jewel, she screamed a combination of thankful relief and dark ecstasy. (BNC FPX 2551)

Given the pejorative connotations arising from considering sex as a violent act, an interpretative process is triggered in the receiver which compels him or her to identify an offensive reference toward the sexual concept conveyed by the metaphor *shot* with the meaning of 'ejaculated'. Thus, the most likely and reasonable interpretation of *shot* is dysphemistic mostly because of the particular conceptualization in which this metaphorical alternative is included; a cognitive association which assumes the existence of a more specific conceptualization whereby the penis is seen as a tool to attack, injure or kill an adversary. By contrast, to resort to the cognitive equation which relates sex to a game unavoidably contributes to a diametrically opposed interpretative process, in which the hearer is likely to be aware of the euphemistic nature of the metaphorical expression. That this is so can be seen in the example below:

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[14] In this respect, it is worthy of mention that Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (1994) propose a pragmatic strategy in the interpretative process for the disambiguation of euphemistic and dysphemistic references. In the same vein, Goatly (1997: 293-328) claims that the disambiguation of metaphorical meanings depends on the Gricean principle of Relevance in relation to the Contents associated with the Field (i.e. social interaction, conversation).

(12) Experts have exploded the old wives' myth that, if he decided to *play away*, there must have been something wrong with the relationship in the first place. (BNC G2V 1087)

The metaphor *play away* will activate its euphemistic sense ('commit adultery') in a more effective way if the reader associates it with the conceptual metaphor SEX IS A GAME, the source of other euphemisms like *play doctors and nurses* and *score* for 'copulate', *play around* for 'copulate casually' or *play the field* for 'be sexually promiscuous', among many others (see Holder 2003). The imagery of game and sports favours an unbiased reinterpretation of a sexual encounter as an innocent pastime. This clearly determines the perception of the receiver, who is compelled to understand the sexual taboo in terms of this particular conceptualization, leaving aside other unacceptable semantic traits of the referent.

When focusing on euphemistic and dysphemistic interpretation, context cannot be excluded from cognitive issues. After all, as Allan and Burridge (1996: 28) argue, mitigation or offence ultimately depend on the context in which the word is used, and thus the euphemistic or dysphemistic quality of a word can never be considered as an intrinsic quality of the word regardless of context. In this sense, a contextually consistent conceptualization significantly contributes to the understanding of euphemisms and dysphemisms. From this standpoint, Pfaff, Gibbs and Johnson provide evidence that the mitigating or offensive value of metaphors is easier to comprehend if there is a conceptual match between these and the context: "Our contention is that a speaker should consider one X-phemism [euphemism or dysphemism] more appropriate than another in a certain context because he is conceptualizing that context metaphorically.... contexts can provide people with metaphorical concepts that influence the appropriateness or ease of interpretation of the X-phemism by cueing them to its metaphorical meaning" (1997: 61-62). In effect, it seems that the mitigating and offensive nature of figurative words and phrases belonging to a particular cognitive domain is easier to comprehend when the context is equally categorized in terms of the same domain. Thus, the interpretation of euphemistic and dysphemistic conceptual metaphors is partly motivated by the presence of lexical units related to this conceptual metaphor. In order to illustrate the role of context in euphemistic interpretation, it is worth resorting to Braine's narrative:

(13) I hadn't fallen in love with her. And I wasn't sex-obsessed.... It was simply that I was an unmarried man with normal *appetites*. If you're *hungry* and someone's preparing you a good *meal*, you'll naturally angle for an invitation. The *meal* was on the table, so to speak, and it was a long time since I had *eaten*. (Braine 1984: 32-33)

The concepual basis of this extract is the cognitive metaphor SEX IS EATING. The euphemistic use of *eaten* with the meaning of 'had sexual intercourse' is easier to reach if the reader considers preceding terms like *appetites*, *hungry* and *meal*, which all share a common sexual reference, namely 'sexual desire', 'sexually aroused' and 'sexual intercourse', respectively. In fact, these metaphorical terms belong to a conceptual equation that relates sex to eating; an association which, in this way, favours their interpretation in a figurative euphemistic sense within a conceptually consistent context.

The above considerations lead me to claim that conceptual associations are crucial in determining the euphemistic or dysphemistic value of the metaphorical substitute. In this sense, conceptualization can be considered as a relevant aid in the disambiguation of a given metaphorical term or phrase insofar as it is largely responsible for the euphemistic or dysphemistic effect of the lexical alternative and, therefore, contributes to establishing the dividing line between mitigation and offence. In this respect, as noted above, the characteristic ambiguity of metaphor can be made explicit by focusing on the nature of the source domain in terms of which the metaphorical substitute is conceptualized. As a result, cognitive conceptualization can effectively contribute to clarifying the intended meaning of metaphorical language.

6. Concluding remarks

Although it has not been my purpose in this article to deal with sexual conceptualization and verbalization exhaustively, I have attempted to outline the main implications underlying both the use and interpretation of sexual metaphorization within the frame of the well-known CMT initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In this sense, the present paper has provided evidence that euphemisms and dysphemisms used to refer to sexual taboos are well accounted for in terms of CMT. More specifically, a cognitively motivated approach to sexual mitigation and offence has revealed different features of sex-related conceptualizations that can be summarised in the following points: first, the degree of lexicalization of metaphorical substitutes greatly influences conceptual categorization and accounts for a bidirectional metaphorical projection between the target and source domains; second, the particular nature and connotations of the source domain largely determine verbal mitigation or offence in the metaphorical alternative employed; third, the type of conceptualization plays a crucial role in the interpretation of the metaphorical substitute in terms of a euphemism or a dysphemism; and fourth, the use of cognitive metaphors in conceptually consistent contexts significantly contributes in the process of disambiguation of metaphorical language. Thus, I hope to have demonstrated that metaphors have the power not only to create a new reality, as Lakoff and Johnson claimed, but also to shape already existing euphemistic and dysphemistic references in their use and interpretation.

In sum, granted that language is metaphorical to the core and conceptual metaphorization constitutes a potent source for euphemistic and dysphemistic sexual reference, it seems quite evident that Cognitive Linguistics cannot be left aside from the study of sex-related metaphorical language. In fact, what emerges from the present research is that CMT is of paramount importance in euphemistic and dysphemistic use and interpretation, given that cognitive representation affects evasive and abusive referent manipulation in a remarkable way. For this reason, the phenomenon dealt with in this paper seems to deserve more attention than it has traditionally received, since, despite the considerable amount of research that has focused on figurative language, relatively little is known about metaphorization as a purely euphemistic or dysphemistic device. Therefore, I hope that the cognitively-motivated approach to

sexual mitigation and offence outlined here will contribute to shedding light on the crucial role of cognitive conceptualization in sex-related euphemism and dysphemism.

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