

Perception of Language (visual art)

Artist's Statement

For Language Diversity and Cultural Identity with Dr. Katharine Burns, the final project asked us to explore topics we felt passionate about that related to the course. It allowed for a wide range of interpretive responses, from essays to podcasts. For this course, I made two digital paintings. Both portray dining rooms, one bright and colorful and the other dark and cold; the paintings depict my feelings and associations with each language, Spanish and English respectively. The more you know about each language and culture, the more you discover in my paintings. Focusing on the metaphors and scenery, I wanted to make parallels; each painting contains hidden metaphors while representing the different ways the languages have of delivering the same message. Can cultures feel or express the same things if they don't share a language?

Zoltan Kovecses showcases some common metaphors seen across many cultures and languages in his work, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (2005). The most common metaphors show many people associate affection with warmth, causes become forces, they see events as motion, view progress as forward movement, link purposes and destinations, and understand difficulties as impediments. Though they have many similarities, it is important to realize that “universal experiences do not necessarily lead to universal metaphors” (4). Therefore, I chose to create more than one painting and have them be different. Showcasing similar experiences through different metaphors, while showing their parallels, signifies the underlying “sameness” they represent.

My paintings include literal metaphors and capture feelings that the languages inspire in me and in other speakers. In the painting representing the English language and culture, I've chosen to paint a dark room with dark green walls during nighttime. There is a mess on the table, yet the piece feels calm. While I love this piece, it also evokes feelings of sadness. While it is a calm scene, the painting shows no character, no faces; it's as if the people were blank sheets. There's no one present in the dining room, a place where one should be with family and friends, conversing and having fun. They should be the ones “spilling the tea” not having it there by chance; the conversation should be flowing like “a piece of cake” and bring them the childish joy that an actual piece of cake often does. They should take chances and not leave it for “once in a blue moon” nor focus on the impossibilities of “mixing apples and oranges” and enjoying the fruit bowl. The flowers, while not having a metaphor attached to them, represent life. They are the only living thing in this image, and yet they don't look lively. They are subtle and beautiful in their own way but don't stand out. For me, although English is a language/culture that I am completely immersed in, I can't help but see the downfalls accompanying it—the lack of familial

relationships, the coolness of the language even if I use it casually, the way words either have no meaning or too much.

The painting representing the Spanish languaculture is parallel to the English one, yet I wanted to make it as different as possible while maintaining the same aspects: a window, a table, and a door to the side. The style is much looser, and “painterly” with no need for exact edges, the walls are a bright yellow, there are multiple pictures on the wall, family pictures, children's drawings, a cross, there is life, people, and pets. This piece is so much more lively, there is so much more present, the wall crowded, the flowers on the table red roses symbolizing the passion in the language, the window showing a *Flamboyan* tree, one of my favorites growing up, with its red flowers dropping and scattering everywhere as they are known for, it is daytime and it is a beautiful day at that. In this piece, I wanted to add small details that hinted at my home like the *Flamboyan*, the newspaper's reference to a statue of Christopher Columbus, and how everything is written in Spanish.

The metaphorical parallels present in the painting aren't as easy to spot as in the English one. The first one to see is *soltar la sopa* or to drop the soup, or spill the soup. It is the equivalent of spilling tea in the English painting. If you look closely at the newspaper, you'll see the tragic news of the “Obispo encontrado muerto,” whose metaphor is *cada muerte de obispo* or every death of a bishop; it is the once-in-a-blue-moon equivalent. The people in the church seem to live forever, so to hear of their death is a rare occasion for many. Finally, my favorite parallel is the cat with bunny ears, *dar gato por liebre*, to give a cat instead of a rabbit or to be incomparable, like mixing apples and oranges. I included one metaphor that does not have an English parallel: *cuando Colón baje su dedo*. When Columbus lowers his finger, it will never happen; it's a statue local to Puerto Rico, and I wanted to share that.

Art, culture, and language are inherently intertwined; they all influence each other. The colors mean something, the style of art means something, the imagery means something, and the words and metaphors mean something. I wanted to showcase both the atmosphere and the feelings brought upon by each languaculture along with the actual language through a visual format. Showing the parallels between Spanish and English along with their differences, shows how we all are similar and different and we can relate to other cultures and other people even if we seem different. As one language theorist puts it, “Metaphors transform meanings; they create new perspectives, new solutions, and new opportunities of connection” (Abernethy 224). Creating these paintings has allowed me to represent these feelings and metaphors and transform them into a visual format encouraging connection with a viewer who may not have the experience of inhabiting both cultures. We are all experiencing the same things, and feel the need to express them, and we have created metaphors for these same things using different approaches. Like my images, we are different, but the same.

Works Cited

Abernathy, Alexis D. "The Power of Metaphors for Exploring Cultural Differences in Groups." *The implications of Multicultural Diversity and Ethnopolitical Conflict for Working with Groups*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 219 - 231.

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