Metaphorical Competence as an Aid to Idiom Learning in Latin

In teaching the Latin language, instructors inevitably confront one of the most challenging aspects of foreign language pedagogy: idioms. Frequently, students are asked to learn words whose idiomatic figurative meanings are wildly divergent and seemingly wholly unrelated to their ordinary literal uses. For instance, the word *locus* is used in Latin to mean "a location, a place" as well as "an idea, an argument, a topic of discourse". But what accounts for this metaphorical usage? How is one to understand the relationship between the word's literal physical sense and its idiomatic mental or intellectual sense? Is this relationship merely arbitrary, or is there some semantic principle that motivates the word's specific figurative interpretation? Furthermore, can clarification of this question help students actually learn this idiom and others?

In this paper, I argue that the idiomatic meanings of *locus* and many other expressions in Latin, far from being a matter of arbitrary linguistic convention (and therefore unfathomable), are instead highly motivated semantically. The motivation for these meanings, I suggest, is a widely distributed metaphorical "theme" in which mental activity is regularly understood in terms of spatial motion. What's more, I propose that by familiarizing students with the metaphors underlying such expressions Latin teachers can facilitate students' memorization of vocabulary and impart invaluable skills to aid students' understanding of Latin literature. Beginning from the hypothesis that taking into account a language's metaphors contributes to comprehending—and so teaching and learning—idioms, I go on to show how Latin's vocabulary of mental activity is systematically structured through metaphors of spatial motion, in such a way that spatialization is inextricably part of how meaning is constituted in this domain. Generalizing from this, I outline a series of classroom interventions that put into practice the notion that "metaphorical

competence", or an awareness of the underlying metaphorical organization of idiomatic meaning,

impacts students' ability to memorize linguistic data and interpret literary texts.