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## **Children's Metaphoric Expressions; The Meaning of Friendship. A Comparative Analysis Between the USA and Poland**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of this research project is to analyze children's understanding of the concept of friendship by investigating symbolic representation in drawing and metaphoric expression in language. This research project is grounded in the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), in which metaphor is defined as a conceptual-linguistic mapping between a source and a target domain. It uses qualitative, ethnographic research based on Spradley's (1979) theory stating that meanings are derived from symbolically coded concepts where X is a symbol and Y is a referent. The researchers in this study, one from the USA and one from Poland, asked a group of preschool children to draw pictures of their friends. When the children finished their drawings, the researchers asked them 4 questions: "What did you draw?" "Why are they friends?" and "A friend is like...", "A friendship is like...". The results demonstrate that preschool children have the cognitive ability to understand the concept of friend and even differentiate between friends and playmates. In the study, the children could determine the number of their real friends, and for most children in both countries, it was 1 or 2 friends. In the group of American children, friendship (X) had two basic meanings (Y): helping (YH) and playing (YP). In Poland, friendship meant playing (YP) and being together after school (YBT). The children in both countries associated friends (target domain) with (source domain) certain people (FP), character quality (FCH), activity (FA) and (FO) object/places. A comparison of the results demonstrates a difference in the number of friends the children claimed to

have in Poland versus the USA. Additionally, the research showed that the American children drew only their friends without including themselves, while the Polish children included themselves in their pictures.

*Keywords: friendship, metaphoric expressions*

## **Introduction – theoretical background for selecting the subject, terminological findings**

This research project uses the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), in which a metaphor was defined as a conceptual-linguistic mapping between a source and a target domain. Previous studies had shown that “children encounter metaphors in all aspects of their daily lives, including the spoken and written discourse of school, and metaphor can be one of the routes through which socio-cultural norms are appropriated. The use of metaphor seems to be a basic human skill, which develops in interaction with developing world knowledge and linguistic skills. Both the use of metaphor and the development of metaphor capacity take place in situations in which language is used for personal and interpersonal goals” (Cameron 1996, p. 49). L. Cameron stated that: “Where once children were thought to develop skills with metaphor only at a late stage (e.g., Piaget, 1974) more recent changes in theoretical frameworks and research methodologies have provided evidence that preschool children can produce and understand metaphorical language that is congruent with their level of conceptual development” (L. Cameron 1996, p. 50). Other researchers go further and suggest that the thought processes underlying metaphor are basic to human development from infancy on. For example, Marschark and Nall (1985, p. 54) stressed that metaphor provides one of the basic ways of learning about the world. Its mapping of different, previously unrelated domains onto each other is seen to extend children’s knowledge to that which is unfamiliar, thus making it a tool as well as a skill. For example, Stites and Özçalışkan (2013, p. 116) emphasized that metaphor plays a unique role in cognitive development by structuring abstract concepts and leading to conceptual change. Existing work suggests the early emergence of metaphorical abilities, with five-year-olds understanding and explaining metaphors that involve cross-domain comparisons (e.g., space to time).

## **Previous research on friendship**

Friendship, in contrast to acceptance, is a close dyadic relationship between two individuals. The effect of friendship has both a positive and negative influence on child development since the dynamic features of friendships create various psychological benefits and costs (Lindsey, 2002). During early childhood, the main ingredients in forming friendships are opportunity and similarity (Cook & Cook, 2009) and initiative and complementary interactions (Goldman & Buysee, 2007). The different dimensions of friendship pointed out by Thien et al. (2012) are closeness, help, and acceptance. Goldman and Buysee (2007) confirmed this adding sharing and loyalty. The previous research on friendship among children used sociometric methods by interviewing young children (Van Hoogdalem et al., 2013; Ladd 1996), surveying teachers (Van Hoogdalem et al., 2013), and surveying parents (Yu, 2011). However, Van Hoogdalem et al., (2013) stressed that the two sociometric methods of investigating friendship such as peer nominations and teacher nominations are not valid methods to identify friends in a peer group of 2 – and 3-year-old children. Their research results demonstrated that none of the 2-year-olds and only some of the 3-year-olds were able to identify their friends. The conclusion drawn was that the young children do not yet have the necessary verbal and cognitive capacities to reliably differentiate between friends and non-friends. The focus of this research is on investigating 3 – and 4-year-old children's concepts of friendship. The study focused on an analysis of their drawings of their friends and the symbolic and metaphoric expressions in them. Additionally, to add further clarification, the study included three follow-up questions for the children to answer related to the meaning of friendship.

## **Research Methodology**

This study used a qualitative, ethnographic research method based on Spradley's (1979) theory, stating that meanings are derived from symbolically coded concepts, where X is a symbol and Y is a referent. In this research, the symbolic meaning of the concept *friend(s)* is analyzed in children's drawings and language. The two researchers, one in the USA and one in Poland, asked a group of preschool children to each draw a picture of their friends. When the children finished their drawings, the researchers asked them 3 questions: What did you draw? Why are they friends? and A friend is like... The data collection included a warm-up task, a story comprehension task, and an open-ended interview. This research is IRB approved.

## **Warm-up task**

First, the researchers asked the children to each draw a picture of a friend(s). During the process of drawing, the researchers first concentrated on the visual, concrete descriptions represented in the drawings and then more abstract representation as initiated by the question "Why are they friends?" In this research, the evidence of comprehension of the meaning of friendship was based on the children's ability to create metaphoric representation. Often, the children talked aloud demonstrating their iconic understanding of the term; they asked questions and answered them. That spontaneous process helped the researchers to understand the meanings that the children were trying to convey. The researchers became engaged interpreter-participants (Denzin, 2010).

### **Story-comprehension task**

After the process of drawing, the children were asked to answer 2 questions: What did you draw? Why are they friends? The answer to the first question confirmed that the children stayed on task, and the answer to the second question provided evidence about the children's understanding of the target metaphor (X). This step of investigation was necessary since, as explained by L. Cameron (1996), "Children's understanding of linguistic metaphors is constrained by their knowledge of the domains involved. It has been suggested that lack of Vehicle knowledge appears more important for comprehension than knowledge of Topic domain" (Vosniadou, 1987), Cameron (1996, p. 53).

### **Open-ended interview**

The most difficult task for children was at the end of the project, when the children were required to construct a mapping source domain that included target domain (X). 2 open-ended questions stimulated this association: A friend is like... /Friendship is like....

### **The American Setting**

The setting for the American portion of the study was the Child Development and Learning Lab in the university city of 50,000 people, where 27,000 are students. A majority of the children in the lab are in the Head Start program, and the rest are the children of students, faculty, and university staff. Out of 68 children, 43 participated in this research project because not all parents signed the consent to involve their children and not all children were interested in drawing. There were 20 boys and 23 girls.

### **The Polish Setting**

The Preschool is situated in one of the major cities in Poland (population over 700,000 people, where 100,000 are students). It was established in 2012 through the initiative of the government, as a facility intended for children from 3 to 6 years of age. The Preschool is a non-public institution; the governing body is the University of Lodz. All children in the preschool are divided into three different age groups. Out of 64 children in the preschool, 40 participated in the research. Some parents did not sign the consent for their children to participate in this project, and some younger children did not want to take part in it because it was too hard for them.

### **Analysis of data**

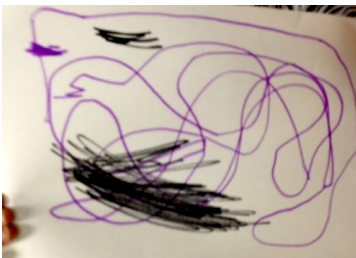
This comparative research attempts to identify cultural meanings that children attach to the concept of friendship. The answers given to 3 questions were analyzed using the (X) to s tend for friendship and the narrative answer (Y). Then created major themes with references given by children (Y1, Y2, Y3, etc.). The last part was to compare the references given by children in two countries, the USA and Poland.

### **Results**

First, the pictures/graphic symbols were analyzed for their symbolic representations. Based upon the children's graphic visualizations, there were five categories of symbolic representations of the topic *friends*.

#### **Finding I Q1. *What did you draw?***

##### **1. *An abstract visualization***



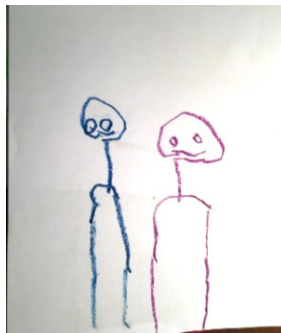
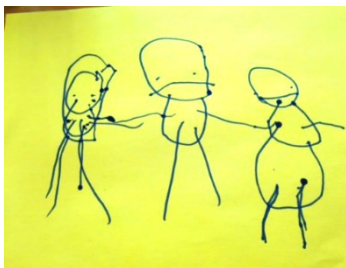
**Example 1.** An abstract visualization on the topic *friend(s)* as drawn by an America child (left) and a Polish child (right). Some of the drawings were abstract visualizations with different combinations of colorful lines. These pictures received their meanings together with the children's narrative.

## 2. An abstract/concrete visualization



**Example 2.** An abstract/concrete visualization on the topic *friends* as drawn by an American child (left) and a Polish child (right). In the abstract /concrete visualizations, besides the lines and circles, there were also concrete elements of human-like figures (mandala-type).

## 3. A static schematic visualization



**Example 3.** A static schematic visualization as drawn by an American child (left) and a Polish child (right). A drawing that was a static schematic visualization included the subject/child and another figure who could be a mother, preschool friend, sister, neighbor, etc.

**4. A static schematic visualization of a friend with elements from nature, or representing their environment**



**Example 4.** A static schematic visualization on the topic *friend(s)* with some elements from nature or the surroundings included as drawn by an American child (left) and a Polish child (right). This type of representation was uncommon in the American group of children. This is the only picture that one American child created and added the letter “f” for friends.

**5. Dynamic visualization with objects**



**Example 5.** Dynamic visualization with objects (often 2) and people who demonstrate a community of people and things. This is a picture drawn by a Polish child (5 years and 5 months old). The Polish researcher reported that the children episodically drew some visualizations of people and things from nature that created the meaning of friendship. An idea of friendship evokes in children pictures of community and unity between nature and people. This type of symbolic visualization was not present in the American children, maybe because the children in the American setting were younger, except one child who was five years old.

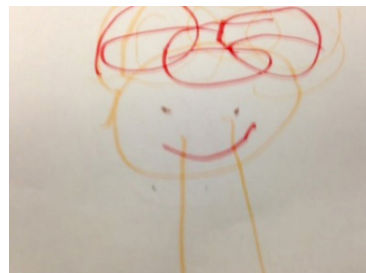
### **Finding II Q2. *Why are they friends?***

The second finding is related to the question about why the children in the picture are friends.

Surprisingly, the children could differentiate between their friends and playmates. Following Piaget's liberated conviction idea, each child was able to very quickly determine the number of friends using previous experience and knowledge. From the first minute of drawing the pictures of friends, they could tell how many friends they had. The American teacher asked what about (*name of the child*) or you play with (*the name of the child*), and the children replied *yes, I play with them, but they are not my friends*. Out of 43 American children, 6 reported having only 1 friend; 14 reported having 2 friends; 4 reported having 3 friends; 5 reported having 4 friends; one child reported having 6 friends, and 2 reported having many friends. In the American sample, 32 children verbally and visually identified the number of friends and others just drew them or did not respond verbally (some of the children were still non-verbal). In the Polish sample, out of 40 children, 35 could identify the number of friends. At most, 20 children were identified as having 1 friend, 10 children as having 2 friends, and 2 children as having 3 friends. There were no children who stated having 4, 5 or 6 friends. The most interesting finding is that the Polish children often drew themselves with friends, but the American children just drew friends without including themselves.

#### **1. *One friend***

In the American sample, 6 children were identified as having one friend. One child, when asked what he had drawn, replied, "...one friend *and* my Mom and brother". Some children struggled with not including their brother or sister as friends (left). In the Polish sample, 20 children claimed to have 1 friend (right). Most Polish children gave the names of their friend(s), and in most cases it was a child from preschool. Some children just said "friend", "my best friend", or a "boy". For one child, his best friend was his Mom.





## **2. Two friends**

In the American sample, most children were in this category, with 14 children claiming to have 2 friends. In the Polish sample, 10 children decided that they had 2 friends, and their friends were children from preschool.



## **3. Three friends**

In the American sample, 4 children claimed to have 3 friends. In the Polish sample, 2 children had 3 friends. In the Polish sample, the children named friends from the previous preschool, the current preschool, and their families.

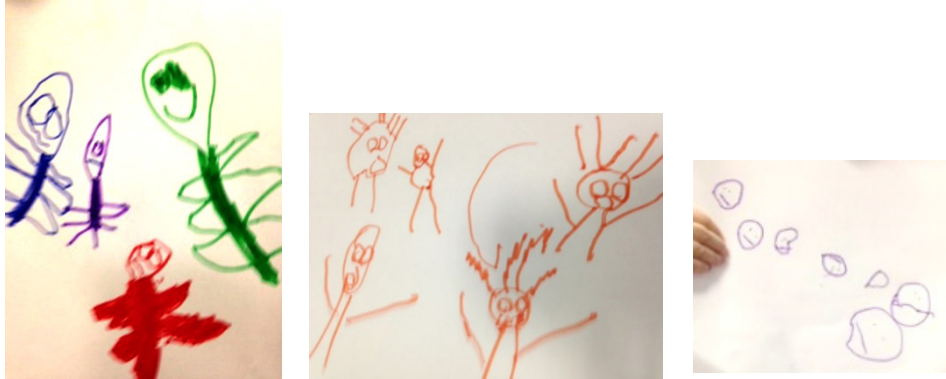


## **4. Four, five and six friends**

In the American sample, 5 children claimed to have 4 friends. Five American children said that they had 5 friends. There was 1 child in the American sample with 6 friends. There was no child in the Polish sample with 4, 5 or 6 friends.

### 5. *Many friends*

In the American sample, only 2 children claimed to have many friends. In the Polish sample, 2 children also declared they had many friends.



Regarding the number of friends, most children in both countries have a notion that friends are very special and that most people have 1 or 2 friends. The study demonstrated that young children have an ability to analyze concepts using *complex and diverse meanings* (Wierzbicka, 2006) by determining the number of friends and differentiating between playmates and friends. Some Polish children explained that “When there are too many friends, it is too noisy and difficult to play, and it will be sad.” Some children in Poland as well as in America named their mom, dad, brother, sister, or cousin as friends.

The third finding is related to the children's ability to determine the characteristics of friendship.

The young children could *convey their meanings to other people* (Wierzbicka, 2006) and explained the characteristics that determined why some children are their friends.

Considering Spradley's (1979) theory of meanings, which stresses that meanings *are derived from the symbolically coded concepts*, in our analysis we are looking at children's meanings of the concept of a friend and comparing references given by American and Polish children.

#### **Finding III Q3. “A friend is like...”**

The next question the researchers asked the children to define a friend. This question was difficult for the children to answer. For the American children, the concept of Friend (F) means people F(P), character quality F(Ch), activity F(A),

and F(O) object/places. In the American sample, the children associate *friends* with people, objects, and character.

(F) Friend is like	F(P) People: Mommy, Daddy, sister, brother, cousin, (name of a child)
	F(A) Activity: helping, doing special things, playing makes you friend, giving hugs, eating with, loving someone, makes you happy, speaking English
	F(Ch) Character quality: kind, like you, happy, makes you happy, smile, fun, loving someone
	F(O) Object: house, animal: elephant

In the Polish sample, the children’s friends are people, family F(P); it is like playing activity F(A); it is like the feeling of love, joy or sadness F(F); it is like an object F(O), a red heart.

(F) Friend is like	F(P) People: family
	F(A) Activity: play
	F(F) feeling of joy or sadness, love
	F(O) Object: red heart

**Finding IV Q4. “A friendship is like...”**

In the American group of children, friendship (X) had two basic meanings: (YH) helping and (YP) playing. Coding: Friendship (X) means helping (YH). In the United States, with its individualistic society in which people are centered on their own needs, friendship means doing something for somebody, helping someone, caring, putting another person’s needs first. Friends help you to do stuff. The children also said that “they always stay friends,” showing that friendship is also related to the “time you are friends.” As one girl from the research group pointed out: “*Friends like you, and do good things for you. They love you and they care. They help you when you are hurt. You can hear their heart beat and they can go with you to the doctor. They are always there for you.*”

(X) Friendship means	YH 1 Does things for you
	YH 2 Makes you happy
	YH 3 Helps you
	YH 4 Lets you drink water first
	YH 5 They put their hands around you to protect you
(YH) Helping	YH 6 They do good things for you
	YH 7 Let you take turns
	YH 8 Love each other

Coding: Friendship (x) means Play (YP). The second reference to the concept of friendship was to play with children. A friend, for the children, is someone with whom they play or rather a person that plays with them and makes them happy. The children gave even more particular descriptions like: “They play tag, go to eat,” “Playing with you is a sign of kindness,” “They are kind; they play.”

(X) Friendship	YP 1 Play with you, sing songs, dance
means	YP 2 Play together outside
(YP) Play	YP 3 Play tag with you

In the Polish group of children, friendship (X) had two basic meanings: friendship (Y) is playing (YP) and friendship (Y) is being together (BT). Coding: Friendship (X) means play (YP).

Out of 40 children, 11 children repeated the same explanation for the meaning of “friend(s) as play.”

(X) Friendship	YP 1 Like to play Star Wars
means	YP 2 Getting together to play with blocks
(YP) Play	YP 3 Going for a walk and playing outside

The Polish children associated friendship with play and explained that play is important because we like to play: “Friendship is when people get together, and they play colors, hide and seek,” Mostly, friends are playmates from preschool, with whom they play with blocks or play Star Wars. Most of the children named peers as the friends that they play with but 2 named adults like a father where both the father or grandpa pushed children on the swing.

Coding: Friendship (X) means (YBT) Being Together

(X) Friendship	YBT 1 Liking each other: she dresses different, but she likes me and I like her
means	YBT 2 Trusting each other: if someone falls down they pick you up
(YBT) Being Together	YTB 3 Visiting each other at home

The basis for friendship is related to “liking someone” and “having the same interest in play.” Another important element is reciprocal understanding and trust. One child explained the real meaning of friendship: “*This is my real friend. She*

*does not attend my preschool, but we visit each other at home. She dresses different than me, but she likes me, and I like her.”*

Another characteristic of friendship for the Polish children is an ability to trust someone: *“If someone falls down, the friend will help you to get up, or if something breaks, they will fix it.”*

One Polish child even mentioned sacrifices: *“My Mom is my friend because she gave birth to me.”*

## **Summary**

In both countries, the children could respond to the given task and draw a friend(s), which means that they are able to think in an abstract way and find connection to the target domain (friend/ friendship). They used symbolic thinking to express their thoughts and feelings and conveyed the meanings to other people (researchers). There were some surprising results at the very beginning of the study, when the children drew just a few friends and when asked, “How many friends did you draw?” they gave very low numbers. When asked a follow-up question, “How many friends do you have?,” the majority said 1 (Polish sample) or 2 (American sample). They could differentiate between friends and occasional playmates, contrary to the conclusion of Van Hoogdalem et al. (2013), that only some 3-year olds can differentiate between friends and non-friends. All the preschool children precisely identified the number of friends, and for some children, the number of friends was higher than 1 or 2. Another finding demonstrated that the American children drew just friends, but the Polish children drew themselves among the friends. The American children associated friendship with help, confirming the findings of Thien et al.(2012) and Goldman and Buysee (2007) and play at school or at home. For the Polish children, the symbolic connotation was play and being together. Another small difference was in the explanation “A friend is like.” For both groups of children, a friend is like a family member or somebody to play with or do activities with. It also could be an object like a toy, but for the American children it is also the character that counts in a friend, like kindness, being nice, or happiness, and in the Polish sample, the important qualities were related to feelings like joy or sadness.

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