# *'The moustache'* returns: the acquisition of metonymy in adult learners of English as an additional language (EAL).

**Introduction** Referential metonymy, as in "*The moustache* (= the man with the moustache) sits down first", emerges strikingly early in linguistic development.

Empirical evidence suggests that children acquiring their first language are able to both comprehend and produce referential metonymy, in an adult-like manner, from at least 3 years old (Falkum, Recasens & Clark, 2017). Indeed, metonymy may be a useful communicative strategy during L1 acquisition. For example, it is highly plausible that children make metonymic use of words they already know in order to compensate for gaps in their still-developing vocabulary.

Moreover, the metonymic use of a simple noun phrase may be less morphologically and/or syntactically complex (and perhaps also less cognitively demanding, for example in terms of memory load) than a literal description (Falkum, Recasens & Clark, 2017).

However, an important question now arises: is metonymy equally useful for *adults* during *L2* acquisition? Adult L2 learners are a developmental population who are acquiring the syntax and lexis of a target language; thus, vocabulary gaps and/or limited expressive abilities may motivate metonymic usages, just as in child language acquisition. Moreover, as adults, they are fully developed in terms of the pragmatic capacities necessary for creative/non-literal language use (e.g. theory of mind, metalinguistic awareness). Will they therefore resort to metonymy as a way to facilitate reference-making?

A further crucial question concerns how referential metonymy compares with other reference-making strategies available in English; namely, compounding (e.g. '*moustache man*') and the use of literal descriptive expressions (e.g. '*the man with the moustache*'). Referential metonymy offers relative morphological and syntactic simplicity, yet compounds and literal descriptive expressions are more explicit. Are the latter strategies favoured as a result in contexts such as L2 acquisition, where the aim of reducing costly misunderstandings may motivate the language user to adopt a 'cautious' approach to communication?

We set out to investigate these issues by examining the comprehension and production of referential metonymy in Japanese adult EAL learners. We focused on the following research questions:
1. Will Japanese adult EAL learners be able to both comprehend and produce novel referential metonyms?
2. Does referential metonymy offer adult EAL learners a linguistically (and possibly also, conceptually) less demanding means of referring?
3. Can Japanese adult EAL learners produce metonymic names for individuals based on the 'property-individual' relation? Is production of metonymic names affected by exposure to examples of 'property for individual' metonymic names?
4. What are the effects on reference-making of a high-pressure context (limited time to respond)?

## Methodology (based on Falkum, Recasens and Clark, 2017)
We recruited 34 Japanese university students (English-language ability levels beginner, intermediate and advanced), and a control group of 20 adult native English speakers. Participants completed 3 tasks: a comprehension task, and two elicited production tasks—one targeting the ability to use metonymic 'shorthands' to refer to novel learning games; and the other, the ability to come up with metonymic names for story characters based on a distinguishing feature of the character.

Comprehension task. A picture-selection task, involving a metonymic and a literal condition (within subjects). Participants had to choose the picture that best matched the target sentence in a short story. The target sentence featured either a metonymic or a literal referring expression.

Example of metonymic condition: This story is about these two guys. It's a very hot day and they are about to relax in the shade. _The moustache_ (= man with a moustache) sits down first.
The 3 picture options were: (A) the story character with the salient characteristic (metonymic referent), (B) the salient characteristic on its own (literal referent), (C) another story character (distractor).

**A**  **B**  **C** 

Game-naming production task. Participants read the rules for two pairs of unnamed novel learning games (e.g. answering language questions to win candies/collect flags), presented one after the other. For each pair, participants were asked which game they would prefer to play, thus prompting them to produce a name. Subsequently, a name for the second game in the pair was also elicited ('_Can you remember the other game? Which game is it?_'), thereby eliciting 4 names in total.

Character-naming production task. Participants were asked to help devise names for characters in a story. They viewed 18 pairs of characters (9 human, 9 animal; order of presentation randomised). Each character had a salient characteristic (e.g. sunglasses, a large hat, etc. See Fig. 1). Participants were instructed to give a name in English for the target character (marked with an arrow) in each pair (arrow position, left vs right, counterbalanced 50/50 across the pairs). In this task, participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: **A** (no time limit for responding; no pre-task exposure to examples of metonymic names), **B** (a 20-second time limit for responding; no pre-task exposure to examples of metonymic names), **C** (no time limit, pre-task exposure to 3 examples of metonymic names), and **D** (a 20-second time limit, pre-task exposure to 3 examples of metonymic names).



**Figure 1** *Example stimulus in character-naming task.*

**Results and discussion.** Japanese adult EAL learners can both comprehend and produce novel cases of referential metonymy. In the comprehension task, EAL participants chose the metonymic referent in the metonymic condition significantly above chance ($p < .001$). In both production tasks, they produced more metonymic (M) expressions than compounds (C), which in turn were more frequent than literal descriptions (L) (game-naming task: M= 26%, C= 17%, L= 9% of total responses; character-naming task: M= 28%, C= 19%, L= 9% of total responses). Additionally, in the character-naming task, we found that prior exposure to examples of metonymic naming resulted in significantly increased production of metonymic names (C: 65% of responses for the condition, vs A: 7%, B: 10%, D: 17%; p= .002). Further, under time pressure and with no exposure to examples, participants relied significantly more on the 'easier' strategy of using random proper names (67% of responses for the condition, vs 10% metonymy; $p < .001$).

In conclusion, our findings suggest that referential metonymy is useful to adult L2 learners as an efficient, economical reference-making strategy. It is also plausible that, for adult L2 learners, referential metonymy fulfils a similar 'gap-filling' function to that proposed for children's L1 development. This has pedagogical implications: it demonstrates the utility of figurative language as a strategy for communicating in spite of vocabulary gaps.

**References** Falkum, I. L., Recasens, M., & Clark, E. V. (2017). "The moustache sits down first": on the acquisition of metonymy. *Journal of Child Language* 44. 87-119.