

The Construction of the Concept Internet through Metaphors

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ABSTRACT: The expressions by which we refer to the Internet reveal how we conceptualize it. Rather than “a network of networks of computers”, as it is usually defined, we actually perceive and experience the Internet as a PLACE. This paper will particularly analyse THE INTERNET IS A CITY as one of the most productive metaphors that shape the concept INTERNET in English, whereas THE INTERNET IS A SEA seems to be the most common metaphor for Spanish speakers. Finally, some possible reasons and consequences for this variation will be advanced .

Keywords: metaphor, Internet, conceptualization.

RESUMEN: Las expresiones con las que nos referimos a Internet y a sus posibles usos revelan cómo lo conceptualizamos. Más que «una red de redes de ordenadores», como normalmente se la define, percibimos y experimentamos Internet como un LUGAR. Este trabajo analiza concretamente la metáfora INTERNET ES UNA CIUDAD como una de las más productivas para formar el concepto INTERNET en inglés, mientras que INTERNET ES UN MAR parece ser la metáfora más habitual para los hablantes de español. Finalmente, se consideran algunas de las posibles razones y consecuencias de esta variación.

Palabras clave: metáfora, Internet, conceptualización.

1. Introduction

The Internet is the big revolution of the 20th century. Its impact has been compared to that of the printing press, the telephone and the television. As a matter of fact, the Internet is not only another sophisticated means of communication, but it has also profoundly affected the way in which we work, study or even socialize. Its effects on the language, on the several languages used for the Internet, are also extremely significant. Much work has already been devoted to analyzing the language in the Internet, especially considering that it is such a recent phenomenon (Cumming, 1995; Davis; Brewer, 1997; Ihnatko, 1997; Baron, 1998; Gains, 1998; Hale; Scanlon, 1999; Crystal,

2001; Shortis, 2001; Posteguillo, 2003; among others), as well as its influence on ordinary speech both in English and in other languages (Erickson, 1998; Lebert, 1999; Lan, 2000; Thomas, 2000). By contrast, little has been said about the language we use to speak about the Internet itself, namely those expressions, mostly metaphorical, like *surfing the web* or *information highway* (Stefik, 1996; Ratzan, 2000; Núñez, 2004; Polley, 2006). The expressions by which we refer to this concept are the key to understand how the Internet is conceived and experienced and will therefore affect the way in which we interact with it. This paper will analyze how we talk about the Internet, that is, the common metaphorical expressions by which we usually refer to the Internet and to the various things we can do on it, in order to find out how the Internet is perceived by its users and how the concept INTERNET is constructed in their minds.

The Internet is widely spread in our lives. We all roughly know what it is and how it works, but it is still an elusive concept that we can only fully apprehend by projecting on it what we know better from other areas of experience. We can learn that the Internet is a network of networks connecting millions of computers all around the world so that we can have access to the information stored in any of them. However, for most of us, who are not experts, the idea of such a big amount of connections and all those data travelling through the lines can make us a bit dizzy. For this reason, we prefer to make use of conceptual metaphors in order to shape the concept and make it more manageable.

Metaphors are a very useful tool to interpret reality. The world around us is in permanent change and we must cope with new information and new experiences all the time. Metaphorical projections allow us to understand what is new in terms of what we already know, and to manage complex concepts in terms of other more familiar ones. This is also the case when we have to deal with something as new and impressive as the Internet.

In the following sections, we will see that the Internet is not experienced as a network of computers, but rather as a big container in which we *load* different kinds of things, or else we *search* in it to find others. Since this is the way in which we interact with the Internet, this is also the way in which we conceptualize it, therefore THE INTERNET IS A BIG CONTAINER. We will also see how from this *basic, ontological* metaphor (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002) some other richer, structural metaphors are derived which better evidence how the Internet is perceived and experienced, such as THE INTERNET IS AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA or THE INTERNET IS A CITY. Furthermore, I will consider the possibility that the expressions by which inexperienced users learn about the Internet can affect their perception of it. In order to evidence this, the different metaphors used by English- and Spanish-speaking users will be contrasted.

As for the sample sentences that illustrate the metaphors shaping the concept, all of them have been taken from a number of websites on the Internet. As the aim of this paper is the analysis of the linguistic expressions that Internet users employ to refer to the Internet, it seems obvious that the Internet itself must be the first source. As Posteguillo puts it: "I believe that in netlinguistics language users' views – i.e. Internet users' opinions – are essential in the description and interpretation of language change in cyberspace" (Posteguillo, 2003: 22). Besides, as this work is concerned with the construction of the concept, the websites visited were mostly forums and guides or tutorials for beginners, because expert users like to use more technical, non-metaphorical

terms, e.g. *URL* instead of *address*, and *download* rather than *open a webpage*. The websites consulted have not been listed, though, because it would be too laborious and still irrelevant for the present analysis, since the sample sentences collected are quite common ones and most of them can be also encountered in common speech.

2. The Ontological Metaphor: The Internet is a Container

As stated above, the Internet, as perceived by its users, is more than just a network of networks of computers as it is often defined. The experience of accessing the Internet in order to send or receive information could be included in what Kövecses calls “undelineated experiences” and so, it can be given a “more delineated status via ontological metaphors” (Kövecses, 2002: 35). As Kövecses explains it, we typically conceptualize our experiences in terms of objects, substances and containers, e.g. IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, or THE VISUAL FIELD IS A CONTAINER. This way we can refer to the target concept, quantify it and better identify different aspects of the experience (see Lakoff; Johnson, 1980: 25 ff.). Still, at this general level, we cannot understand much of the concept, so ontological metaphors are actually the basis of structural metaphors. In fact, the CONTAINER metaphor is a very frequent one in our conceptual system and there are many abstract concepts that we usually understand in terms of physical containers, including events, actions and states (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980: 30 ff.).

Under the metaphor THE INTERNET IS A BIG CONTAINER, we conceptualize the Internet as a sort of big box where people *store* so many things so that other people can go, *search* the box and if they *find* what they need, they can *load it down* from the container and take it to their PCs.¹ The metaphor is evidenced in sentences like the following:

- (1) Let's see what I can find *in the Internet* about it.
- (2) You can use some resources *stored* in the Internet.
- (3) I often *download* music and films *from* the Internet.
- (4) I *searched* the net for pictures of the lake.

However, this is not enough in order to fully apprehend a concept. We need richer, more specific metaphors if we are to understand what the Internet is and how it works. As a matter of fact, we will need more than one metaphor in order to consider the different aspects of the concept.

The fact that people possess alternative, metaphorical models of many experiences and abstract ideas is not a problem, because two different conceptualizations are often needed to solve different types of real-world problems [...] (Gibbs, 1998: 108)

1. The INTERNET IS A CONTAINER is a metaphor motivated by our experience with the Internet, but it could also be considered a consequence of another common metaphor in the field of computers: THE COMPUTER IS A CONTAINER (see Porto Requejo, 2006 a). It is quite straightforward that if A COMPUTER IS A CONTAINER, then A NETWORK OF COMPUTERS IS A BIGGER CONTAINER.

Besides, CONTAINER is just a schematic concept and there is not much of it that we can map onto the concept INTERNET, so further structural, rich metaphors will be derived from this. Structural metaphors created for the construction of a particular concept are not predictable, but they are motivated by the “perceived structural similarity” between the two concepts (Kövecses, 2002: 71 ff.). Perceived similarities are not objective and they usually arise from experience, or can be induced by the basic ontological metaphors that the two concepts have in common.

We will now see some of the most common structural metaphors that shape the concept INTERNET. Most of the source concepts are also containers, thus experiential motivation will be given in order to understand how these metaphors are motivated. Finally, we will see that other metaphors are possible, for example, those developed by Spanish speakers, even if the motivation underlying is still the same.

3. The Internet is an Encyclopaedia

Since the Internet is mostly used to search for information, the Internet is also conceived as a big book, a sort of huge encyclopaedia, containing information about almost anything. Then, THE INTERNET IS AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA with a huge amount of (*web*)pages that you *browse* looking up for some specific information:

- (5) The *browser* will *open* the *webpages* and allow you to *read hypertext*.
- (6) If you find something interesting, you can *bookmark* it so you can go back to it easily.

As a matter of fact, this is not a very productive metaphor and only a small part of the concept ENCYCLOPAEDIA has actually been mapped onto the concept INTERNET.

The pages in the encyclopaedia	the web pages
The text written in the book	the hypertext
To look up for some information	to search the net
To open the book on a page	to download a webpage
To browse the book	to download another web-page (with a browser)
Bookmarks on the book	stored URLs

There may be a number of other possible mappings that have not been developed and therefore do not show up in the linguistic expressions commonly used to speak about the Internet. The emergence of other metaphors that have proved to be far more productive could be one of the reasons why the ENCYCLOPAEDIA metaphor has not developed further.

4. The Internet is a Place

Places are usually conceptualized as containers. Rooms and houses are obvious containers, but we also perceive unbounded places as containers, even the visual field

can be seen as a container, as evidenced by expressions such as *I have him in sight* (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980: 30).

As stated above, the Internet is a container, but it is also a place, the place where you go when you want, for instance, to send a mail, find some information or to meet someone. This is the way in which we experience the Internet. Furthermore, the perceived similarity between the two concepts, INTERNET and PLACE, is probably induced by the basic ontological metaphors THE INTERNET IS A CONTAINER and PLACES ARE CONTAINERS (see Figure 1). In Kövecses's words: "If two concepts (one abstract, the other concrete) share this basic shape or status, this can induce the perception of certain structural similarities between the two" (Kövecses, 2002: 72).

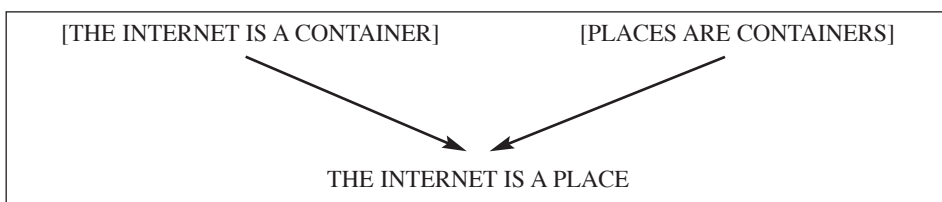


Figure 1. Perceived structural similarity between the concepts INTERNET and PLACE

I would say that THE INTERNET IS A PLACE is the most extended and productive metaphor, considering the number of metaphorical expressions that arise from it, as well as the various specifications that it has developed. Actually, it is so frequent that it is difficult to find an example where only another metaphor, say the ENCYCLOPAEDIA metaphor, is present without combining with the PLACE metaphor:

- (7) This *webpage* has had hundreds of *visitors* in a week.
[ENCYCLOPAEDIA] + [PLACE]
- (8) You can *browse* the *site* using the *navigation* on the left.
[ENCYCLOPAEDIA] + [PLACE] + [PLACE]
- (9) The fact that we may *surf* from a *webpage* to another [...]
[PLACE (SEA)] + [ENCYCLOPAEDIA]

However, this is still a high level metaphor, i.e. it is too abstract and too general so as to be useful. PLACE is a superordinate level concept, a wide category that can include quite different kinds of *places*: from physical bounded spaces, such as a *room* or a *drawer*, to more abstract ones like *the right place on the shelf*, or even some metaphorical ones like the *social position*. Consequently, the PLACE metaphor needs to be further elaborated in more concrete terms if it is going to be of any help to construct a mental image of what the Internet is, how it works and the different purposes it can be used for.

According to Lakoff (1993) there is a hierarchy of metaphors from the most abstract general ones at the superordinate level to the most specific instances; and whereas it is at the superordinate level that metaphorical mappings occur, it is at the lower levels where mental images are rich in detail:

The basic level is the level of rich mental images and rich knowledge structures. A mapping at the superordinate level maximizes the possibilities for mapping rich conceptual structures in the source domain onto the target domain, since it permits many basic level instances, each of which is information rich [...] (Lakoff, 1993, 212)

Therefore, it is at more specific levels that metaphors are useful because, when it comes to making a concept more manageable, the richer the image the better.

Thus, we may perceive the Internet as a working place, a relaxing place or a meeting place, for instance. Depending on what aspects of the concept INTERNET we want to highlight, different specifications are possible, and each one will provide a slightly different model for the Internet: as a WORKING PLACE, a RELAXING PLACE, a MEETING PLACE, or just a STORING PLACE. Figure 2 displays some of the most common specifications of the PLACE metaphor in English, as evidenced by the sample sentences collected.

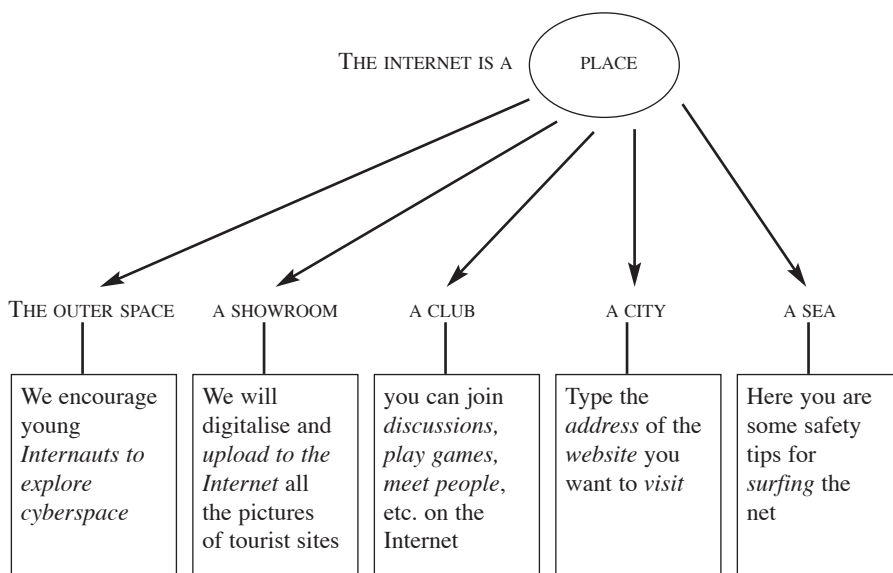


Figure 2. Specifications of the PLACE metaphor

THE INTERNET IS THE OUTER SPACE lays an emphasis on the huge size of the Net. The Internet is then perceived as an unlimited place (*the cyberspace*) that some people (*internauts*) explore, where there are no roads or paths to follow, so that *internauts* must find their way in it, i.e., they must *navigate* the Net. Also, if they move from a website to another by clicking on a link, it is as if they *jumped* in *hyperspace*, which is a common expression in science fiction.

(10) We encourage young *Internauts* to explore *cyberspace*.

(11) We can create links that can *jump* directly into a specific section on a page.

Also, we may want to shape the concept THE INTERNET AS A BIG SHOWROOM, i.e. a place where we can display any information, work, pictures, etc., so that other people can see them.

(12) We will digitalise and *upload to the Internet* all the pictures of tourist sites.

Besides, the Internet is also the place where people can socialize, make friends, join discussions, play games, as in a CLUB, for instance, with even some private areas, too, that you can only access if you have got a *password*.

(13) you can join *discussions, play games, meet people*, etc. on the Internet.

Finally, if we put it all together, the Internet is the place where you can work, study, socialize, go shopping, go sightseeing, make virtual tours, have your own address..., that is, THE INTERNET IS A CITY.

(14) Type the *address* of the *website* you want to *visit*.

This has proved to be the most productive metaphor, with a significant number of mappings, and so it deserves a deeper analysis in the following section.

5. The Internet is a City

The Internet has grown enormously in a relatively short time. Rather than a network of computers, it has become a network of services. In the Internet you can find *online shops, online banks, online libraries, online education...*, besides *e-business* and *e-commerce*, just the same as in a big city. This conceptualization is evidenced in the way we interact with the Internet, as well as in the language we use to speak about it. Consider the following examples:

(15) *Visit our website.*

(16) You can *build* your own *site* and *host* it in a server.

(17) If you already know the *address of the site* you're looking for, type it in.

(18) This *site* is *under construction*.

(19) Our web server automatically gives us a report of the overall *traffic of the site*.

(20) Don't forget to include a *map of the web* in your *website*.

(21) The site offers a *Virtual Tour* of Antarctica and South Pole Station.

(22) It's important for all new *Internet citizens*, also called *netizens*, to remember that there are other surfers out there.

(23) *The internet community* had already begun serious debate on the matter.

(24) If a *hacker breaks into* one of these sites, he can steal some sensitive information.

(25) You'll have to *build a firewall* to protect your *site* from hackers.

Whenever you read a webfile on the Internet, it is said you are *visiting a website* (15). These *sites* are often *hosted* in large servers (16). If you want to read a specific file,

that is, if you want to *go* to a definite *site* in the Internet, you will need to know the (*URL address*) (17), otherwise you may want to look it up in the yellow and white pages of the Internet (www.wayp.com) or search the whole place by using a search engine. Sometimes, you cannot *visit* a site because it is *under construction* (18), which means it is still being *built*. However, it is also possible that too many people try to visit the same site at the same time, that is, there is too much *traffic* to the site (19) and you cannot access it. Also, while visiting a large site, you may get lost. If so, you may need a *map of the web* to find your way in the site (20). Moreover, in this big city, the Internet, you can become a tourist, you can go sightseeing and make *virtual tours* of museums, art galleries or several other buildings (21).

Furthermore, the communication among the Internet users is possible through an extensive service of *e-mail*, with the corresponding share of *junk mail* or spam. Those who behave well in the city and engage in the development and good use of the Internet are called *netizens* (22). They follow the rules (*netiquette*) and consider themselves a *community* (23). On the other hand, in the Internet there is also crime. There are burglars, i.e. *hackers*, who break into some sites without authorization (24), so you may want to build a wall (*firewall*) to prevent them from entering your site (25). What is more, in the Internet there are also vandals (*crackers*), spies (*spyware*) and even *hijackers* who can force a PC to perform a task that the owner did not intend it to do, not to mention those who spread viruses intentionally. All these mappings are summarized in Table 1.

A CITY		THE INTERNET
inhabitants	<input type="checkbox"/>	netizens, (cyber)community, netiquette
buildings and streets	<input type="checkbox"/>	websites, sites under construction, to host a site, URL addresses, e-mail boxes, traffic
services	<input type="checkbox"/>	online libraries, banks, online shopping, education, e-work, e-business...
tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>	visitors to a site, virtual tours, web maps
crime	<input type="checkbox"/>	hackers, crackers, spyware, hijackers

Table 1. Summary of the mappings for THE INTERNET IS A CITY

Thus, by speaking of *sites*, *addresses*, *traffic* and *netizens*, instead of such things as *webfiles* or *Uniform Resource Locators* (URLs), for instance, the Internet becomes something familiar, manageable even for those who are not experts. It is easier to see the Internet as a city where you move around and visit the sites than imagine all the flow of data travelling at high speed through the wires linking millions of computers interconnected all around the world.

6. The Place Metaphor in Spanish: A Dangerous Sea

Most of the metaphors of the Internet are equivalent in English and Spanish, as most of them are inherited by Spanish speakers when the original English expressions

are translated. However, their salience is often different in either language, which may result in different conceptualizations, as we will see.²

Compare the consistency of the ENCYCLOPAEDIA metaphor in the following equivalent sentences:

- (26) If you open a *webpage* in your *browser* and find it interesting, you can *bookmark* it so you can find it again easily.
- (27) Si abres una *página web* en tu *navegador* (navigator) y te parece interesante, puedes añadirla a tu *lista de favoritos* (list of favourites) para volver a ella con facilidad.

In Spanish, webfiles are also conceived as pages, but the *browser* is usually translated as *navegador* (navigator) or *explorador* (explorer) and the *bookmarks* are referred to as *favoritos* (favourites). We can conclude, then, that the ENCYCLOPAEDIA metaphor is less salient in Spanish than it is in English.

On the contrary, the PLACE metaphor is probably stronger in Spanish. There are two main reasons for this to be so. In the first place, the name of the thing, *the Internet*, is easily decomposable for English speakers, for whom the *Inter-net* will always be a *net*. In Spanish, however, *the Internet* is not translated, it keeps the capital initial and drops the article, which means that *Internet* becomes a proper noun in Spanish, the foreign name of a place. Therefore, for Spanish speakers, THE INTERNET IS A FOREIGN PLACE.

- (28) En *Internet* puedes encontrar información sobre cualquier cosa.
(In ***Internet* you can find the information about anything)

What is more, sometimes, when translated as *la red* (the net), the name is still preserved:

- (29) Son muchos los recursos que *la red Internet* (*the net Internet) ofrece para la enseñanza.

In the second place, there is no equivalence in Spanish for the preposition *on* with the sense of “connected”. This means that *on the Internet* is translated as *en Internet* (*in Internet), which obviously makes both the CONTAINER and the PLACE metaphors stronger; even more if we consider that the action of accessing the Internet is commonly referred to as *entrar en Internet* (to enter Internet) and logging off as *salir de Internet* (to leave Internet)

- (30) Con este ordenador no puedo *entrar en Internet*.

As for the several specifications of the PLACE metaphors in Spanish, they are roughly the same, i.e. we can also find examples in Spanish where the Internet is conceptualized as THE OUTER SPACE, A BIG NOTICE BOARD (rather than A SHOWROOM)³ or A

2. For a more comprehensive research on the contrast of both conceptualizations in English and Spanish, see Porto Requejo (2006 *b*).

3. For Spanish speakers, THE INTERNET IS A NOTICE BOARD, rather than A SHOWROOM, because the most common expression to mean *uploading something on the Internet* is *colgar* (to hang or put up).

CITY, but, once again, there is a different degree of entrenchment. Thus, the CITY metaphor is not as consistent in Spanish as it is in English. In Spanish, there are also *sites*, *visitors*, *addresses*, but the terms *netizens* and *netiquette*, for instance, have become loanwords without a translation in Spanish, while phrases like *ciudadanos de la red*, that are often used in Spanish as an equivalent, lack the emphasis and the strong associations of the English blends.

Instead of the CITY, the SEA seems to be the source concept to shape the concept INTERNET in Spanish; and THE INTERNET IS A SEA proves to be the most productive metaphor, as it has a higher number of significant mappings. Consider the following examples:

- (31) Ayer estuve varias horas *navegando por Internet*.
(Yesterday I spent several hours **sailing *in Internet*)
- (32) Para el correcto funcionamiento de las páginas necesitas un *navegador* con JavaScript y Cookies activos.
(For the right functioning of the pages, you need a **navigator* with active JavaScript and Cookies)
- (33) Si el *navegante* lo prefiere, puede *surfear* en la Red con toda seguridad.
(If the ***sailor* likes it better, he can *surf **in* the Net safely)
- (34) Los *piratas informáticos* pueden intentar robar información sobre sus cuentas bancarias.
(IT *pirates* may try to steal information on your bank accounts)

Among the possible causes for this variation, I would point out that the translation of the term *navigate* has played a major role in the development of the SEA metaphor in Spanish. Moving from a site to another in the Internet is usually referred to as *navigate* in English and *navegar* (to sail) in Spanish. Even if the Spanish word has also the sense of *finding one's way*, just the same as *navigate*, the truth is that this is not the most salient sense for the word, which is mostly used by professionals of aviation or as a nautical term. In fact, the most common sense of *navegar* is *sailing*, and the introduction in the last years of another term, *surfing*, Spanish *surfear*, also related to the sea, has actually reinforced the SEA metaphor in Spanish by only adding the idea of a higher speed to the meaning of *navegar*. What is more, the program that allows navigation is not a *browser* in Spanish, but a *navegador* (navigator, a sort of sailing device), using the same root of *navigating*, or *explorador* (explorer);⁴ and the Internet users are called *internautas* or *navegantes* (sailors) (33). Besides, the term *hackers* is usually translated as *piratas informáticos* (IT pirates) (34), which definitely makes the INTERNET a SEA. See Table 2 for the most significant specifications of the PLACE metaphor in Spanish as a consequence of such terminology.

Another possible cause for the development of the SEA metaphor in Spanish could be what Kövecses calls the *broader cultural context* (Kövecses, 2002: 186). In turn, Geeraerts; Grondelaers (1995) consider the relationship between the conception of *anger* today and the classical-medieval humoral theory. In a similar way, the historical tradition

4. There are other terms for the browser like *hojeador* (browser) or *visualizador* (*visualizer) but they have not been widely accepted.

of sailors and explorers in Spanish culture, namely Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America, could account for the consistency of the SEA metaphor in Spanish.

English		Spanish	
the Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Internet	} THE INTERNET IS A FOREIGN PLACE
the Net		La red Internet	
to log on / in	<input type="checkbox"/>	Entrar (enter) en Internet	
to log off / out	<input type="checkbox"/>	Salir (exit) de Internet	
to be on the net	<input type="checkbox"/>	estar en (in) Internet	
navigate / surf	<input type="checkbox"/>	Navegar (sail) / Surfear	} THE INTERNET IS A SEA
Browser	<input type="checkbox"/>	Navegador (sailing device) Explorador (explorer)	
Internet users	<input type="checkbox"/>	Internautas Navegantes (sailors)	
Hackers	<input type="checkbox"/>	Piratas (pirates)	

Table 2. The PLACE metaphor in Spanish

Therefore, Spanish speakers construct quite a different concept for the Internet. Whereas for English speakers the Internet is a familiar place, a city full of services to wander around and search for anything they may need, a community of citizens that follow the rules, for Spanish speakers, it is a foreign place, a dangerous, unknown sea that must be explored to find what you want, but where you must be aware of pirates and other dangers with foreign, untranslated names.

Given such contrasting conceptualizations of the Internet in English and in Spanish, the question arises as to whether the construction of so different mental pictures of the concept can affect the interaction of English and Spanish speakers with the Internet, especially for beginners, who learn about the Internet before actually using it.

7. Conclusions

The Internet is quite a complex concept to be managed by those who are not experts, and most Internet users are not so. For this reason, we speak and think of the Internet in terms of other familiar concepts. This way, we could say that the Internet becomes a “user-friendly” concept.

THE INTERNET IS A PLACE seems to be the most productive and entrenched metaphor for the Internet. It is easier to conceive it as a physical, bounded place than thinking about millions of bytes travelling in a huge network of computers. Furthermore, among the possible specifications of this high-level metaphor, THE INTERNET IS A CITY has become the most extensive one, as it has developed a higher number of mappings, to the point that most of the vocabulary of the Internet comes from city features and services: *e-mail, address, tours, traffic, netizens...* As a consequence, English speakers perceive

the Internet as a familiar place where you can access so many services and resources, a big network that you can navigate for a specific destiny or surf randomly just for the fun of it.

However, as evidenced by the examples above, Spanish speakers have developed a different PLACE metaphor to conceptualize the Internet. Often, as a result of some partial or even impossible translations, and maybe influenced by history and tradition, Spanish-speaking Internet users do not *navigate*, but *sail* and consequently there are not *netizens* and *hackers*, but *sailors* and *pirates*. The mental picture of the Internet for a Spanish speaker is, then, less familiar and friendly. It is still a place, but a dangerous one where you might get lost if you are not an experienced navigator, an Internaut.

It seems obvious that the expressions that we hear and read and those by which we first learn about a concept affect the way in which speakers of a language construct that concept. If so, the differences in the mental images of the Internet for Spanish and English speakers must influence the way in which they each experience the Internet. If the Internet is a vast, unexplored sea with a foreign name for Spanish speakers, this could explain why Spaniards are among the most reluctant users of the Internet in Europe.

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