Discussion note

Does deliberate metaphor theory have a future?

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Does deliberate metaphor theory (DMT) have a future within the interdisciplinary world of metaphor scholarship? My belief is that DMT can possibly make an important contribution to the study of metaphors in communication. However, many of its current assumptions fatally undermine its empirical validity and theoretical credibility. My aim in this brief reply to Steen (this volume) is to resituate DMT so that it can offer new insights into the processes and products of metaphorical language use.

1. New developments in DMT

DMT started out with a splash with the pronouncement that it provided a ''new and improved'' approach to contemporary metaphor theory (Steen, 2006, 2013). The essential claims of the theory are twofold: (1) The vast majority of words and phrases typically seen as conveying metaphorical meaning, especially within conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), are not understood as cross-domain mappings and, therefore, are not really metaphorical. (2) Only so-called ''deliberate metaphors,'' created by speakers and writers for the explicit purpose of being recognized and understood *as* metaphors, really express metaphorical meanings.

Gerard Steen (this volume) offers some slightly new ideas regarding DMT. He still maintains that ''speakers and writers do occasionally ponder over their production processes and then choose to employ a device like a metaphor *as* a metaphor'' (Steen, this volume). But he steps back, as he suggested earlier (Steen, 2011), from any claim that people must be fully conscious of exactly what they are doing when they produce deliberate metaphors. Steen now argues that DMT is based on a ''structural–functional analysis'' of metaphor, which is quite different, so he says, from a processing, or psychological, approach to metaphor. Even if these two perspectives on metaphor are complimentary, according to Steen, DMT's claims about how deliberate metaphors work, how they contrast with non-deliberate metaphor, and what linguistic properties mark some metaphors as deliberate, still all relate to the communicative effects that metaphors have on real listeners and readers. Statements such as ''speakers and writers do occasionally ponder over their production process'' strongly gives the flavor of overt consciousness when deliberate metaphors are presumably created and employed in discourse. Specifying what may, or may not, be in the conscious minds of people when using language is difficult to assess. The appearance of conscious deliberation may emerge from the interaction of multiple, interacting forces that operate along different time-scales (e.g., from evolution to neural firings (Gibbs, 2011a). Despite these complexities, DMT is quite vague about its claims insofar as to whether they have anything to do with psychological processes and products in metaphorical language use.

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Steen (this volume) now suggests that the validity of the distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor is reflected in the fact that people sometimes can ask others about why they used a specific metaphor (i.e., a deliberate one), which ''does not make sense when metaphors are used non-deliberately.'' Yet people ask each other about what they imply by what they say in many contexts, including when a conventional metaphor has been automatically uttered. For instance, arguments sometimes focus on the speaker's motivations for using very clichéd metaphorical phrases, and psychotherapists, to take one example, often question clients about their interpretations of conventional metaphorical phrases which seem to emerge very quickly in the flow of conversation (see Gibbs, 2006). Contrary to Steen's assertion above, people can give coherent explanations of what they imply when stating that they are ''in love'' because of their embodied conceptual metaphor understanding of love (e.g., EMOTIONS ARE CONTAINERS) (Gibbs, 1994). Speakers can describe some of the behavioral consequences of being under the control of forces within the love container that partly defines their experience of being ''in love.''

Similarly, Steen also asks us to consider the following metaphorical expression: ''Imagine your brain as a house filled with lights.'' He argues that this should be understood as a deliberate metaphor because of the way the writer sets up the explicit metaphorical comparison. Nonetheless, Steen suggests that our understanding of ''filled'' in the above expression is not deliberate. Accordingly, Steen predicts that people's situation model for the above utterance ''does not display an additional representation of the concrete action of filling that is attached as a distinct referent to the encompassing metaphor.'' This argument is consistent with Steen's long held position that many conventional metaphors are simply not understood as expressing metaphorical meaning, contrary to the claims of CMT.

But the psycholinguistic and cognitive neuroscience evidence directly contradicts Steen's assertions about so-called non-deliberate metaphors. Much empirical evidence, from a variety of experimental paradigms, clearly demonstrates that people infer embodied understandings of abstract words, such as the concrete action of filling when encountering ''a house filled with lights'' (Gibbs, 2011b). It is mysterious why Steen refuses to acknowledge the relevant experimental data on the very phenomena and theoretical proposals described by DMT.

Steen proposes that some of the experimental findings relevant to CMT, especially those on conventional metaphors that are ''non-deliberate,'' may be handled by an alternative theory referring to lexical disambiguation processes. He argues that simple ''lexical (and conceptual) disambiguation can finish the job of utterance processing much more efficiently'' than what may occur if embodied source domain knowledge is accessed to infer speaker's contextual meanings.

However, there is simply no empirical foundation for this alternative proposal. First, the idea that lexical disambiguation alone can produce understandings of metaphorical meanings via the passive look-up of entries in the metaphor lexicon cannot explain the experimental evidence showing that cross-domain mappings are often inferred during verbal metaphor interpretation. If the theory of lexical disambiguation is to replace CMT, then that theory must explain why the experimental literature demonstrates cross-domain mappings in the way it does. Second, the research on lexical disambiguation has never explicitly examined whether embodied metaphorical knowledge is recruited during people's online interpretation of verbal metaphors. In this way, the lexical disambiguation proposal cannot be used to refute the massive body of evidence showing that the embodied roots of metaphorical source domains are routinely activated as part of people's ordinary interpretations of metaphorical discourse, including verbal metaphors that are categorized as being ''non-deliberate.''

Of course, lexical disambiguation processes are a critical part of linguistic understanding, and surely have a role in online verbal metaphor interpretation. The debate here is not between CMT and a theory of lexical disambiguation. Instead, the question is whether non-deliberate metaphors are entirely understood via lexical disambiguation processes without any activation of their conceptual metaphorical roots. DMT scholars need to stop casually tossing this alternative proposal out into discussions about the merits of its claims and actually conduct the experimental research that would offer empirical support for the alternative. It is also not clear how the lexical disambiguation account could ever explain why conventional metaphorical gestures often give concrete evidence of their embodied source domains (Müller and Cienki, 2009), findings that are also contrary to DMT.

2. Critique of my study

Steen (this volume) raises questions about the specific pragmatic signals employed in my study (Gibbs, this volume), and argues that these may not be relevant to marking of deliberate metaphor. However, Steen does not come forward with any indication as to what truly constitute the appropriate signals for signaling the presence of deliberate metaphor. He only notes that ''A more precise linguistic account of how signals are supposed to interact with metaphors at utterance level processing is needed,'' and that corpus work is now being conducted on this issue. The present ambiguity over what constitutes the correct list of signals or markers of deliberate metaphor has not stopped DMT scholars from proposing such lists and doing research that then indicates, in their view, the prominence of deliberate metaphors in various discourses. If DMT scholars maintain that some pragmatic signals necessarily mark something called ''deliberate