Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Language & Communication 27 (2007) 109–126
LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION
www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

What is the explanatory value of a conceptual metaphor?

Matthew S. McGlone *

Department of Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station A1105, Austin, TX 78712-0115, United States

Abstract

Lakoff [Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1987.] and other "conceptual metaphor" theorists have argued that our use and understanding of figurative language is mediated by unconscious metaphoric correspondences that structure human concepts. Communication scholars have employed the conceptual metaphor framework to infer attitudes and beliefs from the figurative expressions people use to describe their personal experiences. However, these scholars rarely scrutinize the framework's assumptions, many of which have been vigorously challenged in other disciplines. In this article, I critically assess the explanatory value of the "conceptual metaphor" construct and review the empirical evidence for and against it. Based on this assessment, I conclude that despite its important atmospheric influence, the conceptual metaphor framework has not fared well as an account of conceptual structure or a model of figurative language understanding.

Keywords: Metaphor; Analogy; Figurative language; Concepts; Categorization

1. Introduction

A metaphor (from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning "transference") is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to describe something it does not literally denote, e.g., *This journal is a gem*. You may or may not agree with this characterization of the journal, but you probably had no difficulty understanding it. Furthermore, your understanding did

* Tel.: +1 512 471 1920; fax: +1 512 471 3504.
E-mail address: matthew_mcglone@mail.utexas.edu.

0271-5309/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.langcom.2006.02.016

not hinge on a literal reading of the sentence – e.g., at no point in your reading did you wonder about the journal's carat weight or how it might look in an engagement ring. The meanings of metaphorical expressions do not coincide with the literal meanings of words comprising them. How then do we go beyond the literal to understand them? There are scholarly contemplations of this question dating back to Aristotle, but only in the twentieth century has it been regarded as an important problem in the study of language and thought.

Aristotle (1965) considered metaphor a sign of language mastery and genius, but he also deemed it ornamental, appropriate for poetry but too enigmatic for philosophical or scientific discourse. Few contemporary language scholars agree with his limited view of metaphor's utility, although many still endorse his account of metaphor understanding. According to what has come to be known as the Aristotelian "comparison view," metaphors of the form *X is a Y* are understood by implicitly converting them into simile form, *X is like a Y* (*This journal is like a gem*). This conversion serves the dual purpose of affording the proposition literal truth (in that any two things, even a journal and a gem, are literally alike in some respects) and making explicit the analogical comparison Aristotle presumed to be the crux of metaphor. Once converted to a simile, the metaphor is then interpreted by determining the commonalities of the two things compared. The comparison view thus treats metaphor as a species of analogy and asserts that the perception of similarity is the basis of metaphor use and comprehension (Miller, 1993; McGlone, 2003).

Aristotle's relegation of metaphor to stylistics had the unfortunate effect of leading many subsequent generations of language scholars to ignore the topic altogether. Up until the late 19th century, the study of metaphor was primarily the province of literary scholars who focused on the interpretation of particular tropes in poetry and fiction. Near the turn of the twentieth century, French philologist Breal's (1899) *Essai de Semantique* sparked new interest in the topic among American linguists and philosophers. Breal persuasively argued that metaphor was not mere ornament, but a ubiquitous feature of language and a principal device of linguistic change. Richards (1936) later took up this cause and introduced a terminology of metaphor that has become fairly standard: The term used metaphorically is the "vehicle" (e.g., *gem*), the term to which it is applied is the "tenor" or "topic" (e.g., *this journal*), and the meaning of the metaphor is the "ground." Building on Richards' work, philosopher Max Black (1962) articulated an influential alternative to traditional views of metaphor understanding. Having rejected Aristotle's comparison view as too simplistic, Black argued that metaphor is a communicative phenomenon operating not at the level of mere word meaning, but at the (ostensibly) deeper level of conceptual structure. According to his "interaction view," metaphors are understood by perceiving the topic concept "in terms of" the vehicle concept to produce a ground that combines their alignable conceptual attributes and thereby transcends their literal denotations. Contemporary metaphor theorists have frequently (and justly) criticized Black's vague account of figurative transcendence, but most have nonetheless adopted his notion of "interaction" as a preferable alternative to "comparison" for describing the cognitive processes underlying metaphor use and understanding (Ortony, 1979; McGlone and Manfredi, 2001).

In the years since Black's (1962) treatise, a variety of theories and models have been offered to specify how topic and vehicle concepts interact to yield metaphoric meanings. Undoubtedly the most influential has been the "conceptual metaphor" framework advanced by the linguist George Lakoff and his colleagues (Lakoff, 1987, 1990, 1993, 2002; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1998; Lakoff and Turner, 1989). According to their