

# GEORGE LAKOFF'S THEORY OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

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**Abstract:** This paper is an overview over George Lakoff's theory of conceptual metaphor which he developed together with Mark Johnson. Conceptual Metaphor Theory's basic description of metaphor is comparable to received wisdom in philosophy and literary studies, and maybe regarded as a matter of common knowledge. Metaphors arise basically where one thing is defined in terms of another for rhetorical outcome. Nevertheless, this is as far as the correspondence goes. Being 'contemporary', 'conceptual', and a major support of the cognitive linguistics paradigm, CMT starts to argue for the relationship between the human cognition and the linguistic metaphors.

**Key-words:** conceptual metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, cognitive linguistics

Lakoff's early career was under the huge influence of Noam Chomsky's ideas. By the 1970s, there was a gap between those who accepted Chomsky's theory of transformational-generative grammar, and those who embraced an even more radical 'transformationalist' approach to the study of language. This approach was known as generative semantics.

There can still be identified traces of the generative semantics in Lakoff's work, especially, in his search for the semantic and conceptual basis of linguistic structures.

A basic hypothesis of the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm is that the structuring and organization of language mirror the structuring and organization of cognition. Cognitive linguists have simply relied on this premise in two ways. To begin with the knowledge about the nature of human cognition from neighbouring disciplines such as cognitive psychology has been applied to analyze different aspects of language structure and use. Furthermore, hypotheses about human cognition have been made based on observations of language structure and use. It is obvious that Lakoff (1987) made an important contribution to the first approach by applying insights from cognitive psychology to describe semantic and syntactic phenomena in different domains of language. However, Lakoff's contribution to the second approach has been even more important, if regarded from the impact, development, and conception of responses to what he together with Mark Johnson called the *Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*, or *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT).

The basis and development of CMT are best depicted in three important publications, among other occasional commentaries and analyses. These are: *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* (Lakoff, 1993), and *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). CMT's basic description of metaphor is comparable to received wisdom in philosophy and literary studies, and maybe regarded as a matter of common knowledge. Metaphors arise basically where one thing is defined in terms of another for rhetorical outcome. Nevertheless, this is as far as the correspondence goes. Being 'contemporary', 'conceptual', and a major support of the cognitive linguistics paradigm, CMT starts to argue for the relationship between the human cognition and the linguistic metaphors.

The fundamental arguments of CMT are: the *conventionality argument*, the *conceptual structure argument*, and the *embodiment argument*.

The conventionality argument

Metaphors are not limited to being used in creative writing and speaking. They are extensively and usually used in everyday language, and this is probably to be the case for most if not all languages spoken on the planet.

The conceptual structure argument

Metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon. The linguistic metaphors demonstrate the way in which concepts are organized in our minds. People do not just describe, but also understand one thing in terms of another by transferring, or 'mapping' knowledge about one concept (the 'source concept') to another (the 'target concept'). Considering that a large part of language is metaphoric, as per the conventionality argument, it means that our conceptual knowledge is also to a great extent metaphoric.

The embodiment argument

In agreement with CMT, the source concepts are frequently practically concrete and have some kind of 'bodily basis' (Johnson, 1987: 13), on one hand. On the other hand, target concepts are frequently abstract and cannot be straightforwardly experienced or observed. Considering that a lot of our concepts are metaphoric, as per the conceptual structure argument, our conceptual understanding depends essentially on our bodies and the

physical environment in which they live. The study of the bodily basis of cognition is largely referred to as *embodied cognition* (Anderson, 2003), and is attentively discussed in philosophy, psychology and cognitive science.

If we take into consideration the English expressions such as *he has come a long way in life, this is my ticket to success, and we are fellow travelers in the journey of life*, the conventionality argument is made on the assumption that such metaphoric expressions are usually used and understood, and appear to have more or less equivalent counterparts in many languages. In addition, they converge from a semantic viewpoint and thus show a tendency to describe aspects of 'life' with the terms related to 'journeys' (for instance: *a long way, ticket, travelers*). Furthermore, it is very difficult to comprehend and express these ideas about 'life' without using metaphor. This remark supports the conceptual structure argument. George Lakoff and his collaborators point out that our conception of the world is structured by a lot of such metaphoric associations, as well as the metaphor of time as space, quantity as verticality, anger as heat, etc. Finally, if we refer to the embodiment argument, the source concepts (journeys, space, and verticality) include concrete notions (paths, movement, and physical locations) which determine the inferential logic for understanding their abstract correspondents. For instance, the logic that determines the idea of 'passing through' various 'stages' in life is determined by the actual physical experience of moving from one place to another through a number of intermediate locations.

All the ideas presented above have important theoretical and practical implications which Lakoff and his collaborators have developed and explained in a subsequent series of cross-disciplinary attempts. If we agree with the claim that metaphors bring to light the way in which our conceptual systems are structured and embodied, we have to think as well how this would connect to any domain of human knowledge. An early attempt to literature with *More Than Cool Reason* (Lakoff & Turner, 1989) was most expected given that CMT would make us consider the place of 'poetic metaphors' alongside the amount of 'conventional metaphors' which apparently infused everyday language and thought. According to CMT, Lakoff and Turner explain and illustrate in *More Than Cool Reason* that metaphors used to conceptualize notions such as death, life and the great chain of being in the Western literary tradition might appear remarkably complex, but are in fact detectable to the same fundamental mappings which structure everyday language and thought. This involves that creating, interpreting, and appreciating literary metaphors include the same cognitive processes and mappings which structure our conventional understanding of the world.

Together with Mark Johnson, Lakoff's next important work, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), tries to enlarge CMT's arguments upon Western philosophical tradition itself. While examining a wide range of fundamental philosophical concepts (e.g. causation, temporality, and the 'self'), Lakoff and Johnson challenge the validity of their traditional descriptions by Western philosophers. First of all, they demonstrate the way in which the linguistic expressions used to describe notions such as time and causation usually appear as metaphoric. According to CMT the way we conceptualize these notions is also metaphoric. Frequent expressions such as *the time is flying by* and *Christmas is coming*, for instance, mean that temporality is conceptualized as spatial movement (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 136).

Lakoff and Johnson use such examples in order to problematize the traditional view that there is one impartially correct and 'literal' description of time, causation, etc. which does not depend on and is transcendent to our understanding of it. Nevertheless, they point out that this does not mean a relativistic situation in which one set of metaphors can be immediately replaced with another set to give a distinct conception of these fundamental notions. As such metaphors are *embodied* (in the way we have presented the embodiment argument above), the way we conceptualize these notions are persuaded and forced by our bodies and interactions with the rest of the world. From an evolutionary viewpoint, this suggests that our understanding of these basic notions, though metaphoric and not strictly 'objective', is still natural and adaptive – a situation that Lakoff and Johnson regard as "embodied realism".

Immediately after *Philosophy in the Flesh*, in the book *Where Mathematics Comes From*, Lakoff and Rafael Núñez (2000) once again develop the same argument to the non-verbal domain of mathematical concepts. They explain that mathematical logic also appears to be reducible to metaphors grounded upon human embodiment. Some basic mathematical "grounding metaphors" involve the conceptualization of arithmetic as object collection or construction, the "measuring stick" metaphor, and the idea of arithmetic as moving along a path (Lakoff & Núñez, 2000: 50-76), all of which develop from aspects of basic bodily experience. In addition, Lakoff & Núñez affirm that the notion of a literal, transcendental, and objectively correct definition of the universe is misplaced. Instead, the predominance of embodied metaphors suggests that mathematical and philosophical truths must be constrained by our embodied capacities, because they are human attempts to describe and define the universe,.

Lakoff and his collaborators focus on explaining the embodied origins of conceptual metaphors dedicating large part of their work to it. There are some questions regarding the social effects of metaphors. For instance: How might metaphors shape human beliefs, actions and attitudes in our social environment? Lakoff tries to provide some answers in his analyses of the metaphors underlying and shaping American political values and policies. In his work *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't* (Lakoff, 1996), Lakoff defines 'liberals' and 'conservatives' of the American political parties, and argues that their various views of the world emerge from how they metaphorically conceptualize America in different ways. While both camps perceive the nation as a metaphorical family, the liberals conceptualize the ideal family as having a "nurturant parent", while the conservatives strongly consider the necessity of a "strict father" (Lakoff, 1996:413).

Lakoff tries to point out that these metaphors are not only ways to label the differences in ideology, but have a continuous and concrete influence on environmental, healthcare, foreign, economic relations and other such policies. Many experimental studies have highlighted the idea that metaphors play an important part in influencing social behaviors and judgments in domains such as desire, emotion, and temporal perception. Lakoff has an important role in inspiring research directions which aim to demonstrate that conceptual metaphors emerged due to our bodily makeup, manifest themselves both linguistically and non-linguistically, and give shape to our values, beliefs, thoughts, language and actions.

Recently, Lakoff together with Jerome Feldman have developed what they call the *Neural Theory of Thought and Language* (NTTL) (Feldman, 2006; Lakoff, 2009, 2012). NTTL is based on the contemporary neuroscientific findings to describe language and thought processes in terms of what really happens in the physical brain. Lakoff argues that NTTL can now provide empirical descriptions of phenomena such as the embodiment, processing, and contextual properties of conceptual metaphors. Generally speaking metaphors are realized in the form of neural circuits which are activated, inhibited, and interacting together. Even though NTTL keeps the integrity of CMT's founding claims, namely the conventionality, conceptual structure, and embodiment arguments and places them upon a new neuro-scientific basis, the initial saying that we "live by" metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:4) can only be consolidated if its neural basis can be established.

George Lakoff has made huge contributions to cognitive linguistics through his work on categorization and metaphor, his research on the neural theory of language, and the complex and cross-disciplinary research and applications he has inspired. The contemporary theory of metaphor will continue to be acknowledged as a major support for cognitive linguistics in the future.

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