Conceptual Metaphor & Conlanging

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The Traditional View of Metaphor

1. Metaphor is a property of words, i.e., a linguistic phenomenon
2. Used only for artistic or rhetorical purposes
3. Based on a resemblance between two entities being compared
4. Used consciously and deliberately, usually requiring literary/rhetorical skill
5. It is a figure of speech only; it is not needed for everyday communication
Conceptual Metaphor

• Lakoff & Johnson (1980): *Metaphors We Live By*
  – Human beings structure their understanding of their experiences in the world via “conceptual metaphors” derived from basic sensorimotor and spatial concepts (spatial primitives and image schemata) learned during infancy and early childhood.
  – Learned via interaction with external environment.
  – The process is largely subconscious.
  – These simpler, more basic concepts are used as a framework for conceptualizing and understanding more abstract experiences and situations.
Examples of Conceptual Metaphor

• LOVE IS A JOURNEY
  – Look *how far* we’ve *come*.
  – They *went* their separate ways.
  – We’re *at a crossroads*.
  – This relationship *isn’t going anywhere*.
  – We can’t *turn back now*.
  – It’s been a *long bumpy road*.
  – We’re just *spinning our wheels*.
  – Our marriage is *on the rocks*.
  – So *where are we*?

• AN ARGUMENT IS WAR
  – Your claim is *indefensible*.
  – He *attacked* every weak point in their argument.
  – Your criticisms are *right on target*.
  – I *demolished* his argument.
  – He’s yet to *win* an argument with her.
  – If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*.
  – They *shot down* each one of my arguments.
Examples of Conceptual Metaphor

• STATES ARE SHAPES
  
  What shape is the car in? He doesn’t fit in.
  I’m out of shape. She’s a square peg.
  Prison reformed me. Shape up!

• SEEING IS TOUCHING / EYES ARE LIMBS
  
  I can’t take my eyes off her. His eyes are glued to the TV.
  I can pick out every detail. He ran his eyes over her body.

• LOVE IS MADNESS
  
  I’m crazy about her. You’re driving me out of my mind.
  He always raves about you. I’m just wild about Harry.
Examples of Conceptual Metaphor

- **INTIMACY IS WARMTH / LACK OF INTIMACY IS COLDNESS**
  - She finally *warmed up* to him.
  - He is a *cold* person.
  - I treated her very *cool*.
  - Those two are *hot* for each other.

- **INTIMACY IS PROXIMITY / LACK OF INTIMACY IS DISTANCE**
  - I feel very *close to you*.
  - Her manner is *very distant*.
  - We’re *drifting apart*.
  - He is very *unapproachable*.

- **AN ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING**
  - That *supports* what I’m saying.
  - The evidence *buttresses* my statement.
  - Your argument is *crumbling*.
  - I’m *building up* evidence for my claim.

- **AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY**
  - What are you *driving at*?
  - I want to *take* that point *a little further*.
  - I don’t *follow you*.
  - That *leads to* the following conclusion.
  - I’m *not with you*.
  - You’ve *lost* me.
1. Metaphor is a property of concepts, not words, i.e., we don’t simply use metaphor to describe one thing in terms of another, we use it to understand a thing in terms of another.
The Traditional vs. Cognitive View

2. Metaphor is not simply or even primarily used only for artistic or rhetorical purposes; its primary purpose is to allow us to better understand abstract concepts.
The Traditional vs. Cognitive View

3. A metaphor is often *not* based on similarities; rather, it is based on systematic correspondences ("mappings") of elements from a concrete "source" domain onto elements of a more abstract "target" domain.
The Traditional vs. Cognitive View

4. Metaphor is used consciously and deliberately, usually requiring literary/rhetorical skill.

4. Metaphor is used effortlessly (and often subconsciously) in everyday life by ordinary people.
5. Metaphor is a figure of speech only; it is not needed for everyday communication.

5. Metaphor is far from being merely a superfluous linguistic ornament – it is an inescapable and inevitable process of human thought and reasoning.
Mapping Example: LOVE IS A JOURNEY

• LOVE IS A JOURNEY
  – Look *how far* we’ve *come*.
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Mapping Example: LOVE IS A JOURNEY

Source: JOURNEY

- the travelers  the lovers
- the vehicle  the love relationship itself
- the journey  events in the relationship
- the distance covered  the progress made
- the obstacles encountered  the difficulties experienced
- decisions about which way to go  the choices about what to do
- the destination of the journey  the goal(s) of the relationship

Target: LOVE
Mapping Example:
ANGER IS A HOT PRESSURIZED FLUID IN A CONTAINER

**Source:** HOT FLUID UNDER PRESSURE IN A CONTAINER

- the fluid → anger
- the container → one’s body (or one’s head)
- the heat → the intensity of the anger
- the pressure → one’s control over the anger
- bursting/overflow of the container → loss of control over the anger

**Target:** ANGER
Limitations on Conceptual Metaphors

• Re: the ARGUMENTS ARE BUILDINGS metaphor:
  – We can say:
    “Your argument rests on a solid foundation.”
    “Her theory has withstood attack after attack.”
    “Without supporting evidence, his argument will collapse.”
  – But we can’t we say:
    “I like the view from your argument’s windows.”
    “Your argument could use a taller chimney.”
    “If his theory is true, it should have more tenants.”

• So why aren’t all elements of the source domain mappable to the target domain?
Limitations on Conceptual Metaphors

• **Complex metaphors** built from two or more **primary metaphors** can only incorporate elements common to all the primary metaphors, e.g.,

  – **ARGUMENTS ARE BUILDINGS** is a complex metaphor based upon two primary metaphors:
    • **LOGICAL STRUCTURE IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE**
    • **PERSISTANCE IS REMAINING ERECT/UPRIGHT**

  – Elements such as **foundation, support** and **collapse** are common to both metaphors, whereas **windows, chimneys**, and **tenants** are not.
Limitations on Conceptual Metaphors

• The Invariance Principle
  – In a metaphorical mapping, all elements from the source domain can be mapped onto the target domain as long as those elements are coherent with the image-schematic properties of the target domain.

• This explains why the following instance of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is incoherent:
  – “Having chosen the path culminating in my marriage to Juliette, I turned around and went back to the fork to marry Helen instead.”
Conceptual Metaphor

• Based on body symmetry/orientation, sensorimotor interaction with the external environment, proprioception, and emotional experience, we come to metaphorically conceive of ourselves and others as
  – more UP than DOWN
  – more FRONT than BACK
  – more ACTIVE than PASSIVE
  – more GOOD than BAD
  – more HERE than THERE
  – more NOW than THEN

• Implications for non-humanoid con-cultures/conlangs
Conceptual Metaphor

• Most conceptual metaphors are specific instances of more general metaphors:
  – STATES ARE LOCATIONS
  – CHANGES ARE MOVEMENTS
  – CAUSES ARE FORCES
  – ACTIONS ARE SELF-PROPELLED MOVEMENTS
  – PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS
  – ACTION IS DIRECTED MOTION
Conceptual Metaphor & Conlanging

• When translating, identify any English conceptual metaphors. Decide whether to adopt, substitute, or avoid them entirely.

• Choose from any source domain which can be logically mapped onto another,
  – while excluding elements not common to all underlying primary metaphors, and
  – without violating the invariance principle

• Don’t violate pre-linguistic bodily-based metaphors arbitrarily (UP, FRONT, ACTIVE, GOOD, HERE, NOW).
  – On the other hand, if your speakers are non-humanoid, you should rethink your bodily-based metaphors.
Example: the TIME IS A RIVER metaphor
– Is “upriver” the future or the past?
– Is “downriver” the future or the past?

From the point of view of:
– a tribe living on the riverbank
– a nomadic tribe descending the river’s course
– a nomadic tribe following the river inland
– a sentient avian species flying overhead
Conceptual Metaphor & Conlanging

• Think up metaphors whose underlying conceptual logic matches your con-culture or the psyche of your speakers, e.g.,

  LOVE IS DANCING       LOVE IS DEFUSING A BOMB
  MEMORIES ARE DISEASES  GOD IS THE SEA
  THE FAMILY IS A JUNGLE LOVE IS A SCHOOL
  THE FUTURE IS A JESTER LIFE IS MUSIC
  A PROJECT IS A PREGNANCY LIFE IS WAR
  SEX IS ART             EMOTIONS ARE ZOO ANIMALS
  SEX IS WEATHER         THE MIND IS A LIVING BODY
  SEEING IS EATING       COMMERCE IS SEDUCTION
  CRIME IS A CIRCUS      ANGER IS A HOSPITAL
Conceptual Metaphor & Conlanging

**COMMON SOURCE DOMAINS**
- The human body
- Health and Illness
- Animals
- Plants
- Buildings and Construction
- Machines and Tools
- Games and Sport
- Money and Business
- Cooking and Food
- Heat/Cold/Light/Darkness
- Forces
- Movement and Direction

**COMMON TARGET DOMAINS**
- Emotion
- Desire
- Morality
- Thought
- Society / Nation
- Politics
- Economy
- Human Relationships
- Communication
- Time
- Life and Death
- Religion