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What Are Metaphor Wars?

Lovers of language adore metaphor. There is nothing more thrilling for metaphor enthusiasts than to stumble across a phrase or passage that beautifully and concisely captures a metaphoric understanding of some idea or event. Classic metaphors, such as William Shakespeare's "Juliet is the sun," or Robert Burns's "My love is like a red, red rose," express sentiments about people and experiences that are almost impossible to state using language other than metaphor. Both metaphors assert something new about their topics (i.e., "Juliet" and "My love") in terms of concepts from very different aspects of life (i.e., "the sun" and "a red, red rose"). We marvel at the creative dexterity of gifted speakers and writers for their special talents in both thinking about certain ideas in new ways, and communicating these thoughts in vivid, poetic forms. Many metaphors have special linguistic, aesthetic, and possibly cognitive, functions deserving our close attention and persistent admiration.

Metaphor scholars are often fanatical in their pursuit of metaphoricity in language and life. They closely study language and other human actions/artifacts for clues on people's metaphoric conceptions about their lives and experiences of the world around them. Consider one example of metaphor in action by reading a brief narrative that was delivered by Chris Matthews on his American TV political discussion program "Hardball" (Sept 28, 2012).[1] Matthews was commenting on the upcoming TV debate between President Barack Obama and his opponent, Mitt Romney, in the 2012 Presidential contest. Read the passage and note instances where words and phrases possibly convey metaphorical meanings.

> Let me finish tonight with next week's first debate in Denver.
>
> I'll be out there to watch the two of them go at it. I have no real idea what to expect. I think Romney will take some hard shots; he may spend

> the whole 90 minutes blasting away at the President, serving him with one indictment after another, hoping that something will stick.
>
> I think Obama will play with him, parry the assaults, block the blows, try to keep his head clear so he can avoid getting hurt. I think it will start slow with both men trying to be cautious, neither able to land a punch, not hard enough to register with the tens of millions watching.
>
> Then it will happen: Romney will deliver what is clearly a pre-rehearsed moment, a sound byte. It will be something about Obama not delivering on a promise, something about the economy he said he'd do but hasn't. He will expect the President to defend himself.
>
> When he does, pointing to what he inherited from Bush, Romney will pounce. He'll say that Obama's not running against Bush. This will be the Romney strategy: get Obama to pass the buck on the tough economic recovery and then land his Sunday punch.
>
> I suppose President Obama knows this is all coming and is preparing to deal with it. The good news is this: a month ago, all his rival had to do was say that Obama's done his best – he got his stimulus, got his healthcare program . . . and here we are. I think that might have nailed it – a month ago.
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> Something's changed. It could have been something as definite as Bill Clinton's speech but people don't feel stuck like they did, don't think all we need is some other president – and that's Romney's problem, and it's a big one.

Matthews's commentary depicted the upcoming Presidential debate as a sporting event or, more specifically, a boxing match. Many words and phrases give evidence of the POLITICAL DEBATES ARE BOXING MATCHES metaphor, including "Romney will take some hard shots," and will be "blasting away at the President," but Romney will "expect the President to defend himself," and that "Obama will play with him, parry the assaults, block the blows, try to keep his head clear so he can avoid getting hurt," even if both men may not be "able to land a punch," although eventually Romney "will pounce" and be able to "land his Sunday punch."

Why did Matthews design his commentary about the Presidential debate around the metaphoric concept of POLITICAL DEBATES ARE BOXING MATCHES? A traditional assumption is that people use metaphor for specific rhetorical purposes, namely to express ideas that are difficult to convey using literal language, to state something in a compact

manner, to memorably capture the vividness of our phenomenological experience, and, at times, to be polite.[2] Matthews's commentary appears to be motivated by several of these communicative goals. His choice of boxing metaphors conveys vivid, memorable images of the forthcoming Presidential debate that would be challenging to describe using non-metaphoric discourse.

But what if metaphors were not just special rhetorical devices? What if metaphors were fundamental tools that structure how people ordinarily think about abstract ideas and events? One possibility is that people's understanding of many aspects of everyday reality is constituted by enduring metaphorical schemes of thought. Metaphor does not signify an unworldly transcendence from ordinary language, thought, or reality. Instead, what is most clichéd and conventional about reality are those aspects of experience that are primarily constituted by metaphorical thought![3]

The proposal that metaphor is as much a part of ordinary thought as it is a special feature of language has been voiced by a few rhetoricians, philosophers, and others for hundreds of years. Yet this "metaphor in thought" thesis gained its greatest attention from the 1980s on with the rise of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) within the field of cognitive linguistics, most notably starting with the publication in 1980 of the widely read book *Metaphors We Live By,* co-authored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Unlike earlier scholars who speculated on the metaphorical basis of thought, Lakoff and Johnson provided systematic linguistic evidence to support the claim that there are metaphors in mind or "conceptual metaphors." Although some linguistic metaphors clearly present novel conceptualizations of different objects and ideas (e.g., "My love is like a red, red rose"), many conventional linguistic statements reflect the existence of enduring conceptual metaphors.

For example, consider the following list of verbal expressions, originally discussed in *Metaphors We Live By*:

"Your claims are indefensible."
"He attacked every weak point in my argument."
"His criticisms were right on target."
"I demolished his argument."
"I've never won an argument with him."
"You disagree? Okay, shoot!"
"If you use that strategy, he'll wipe you out."
"He shot down all my arguments."

Each of these linguistic statements gives concrete realization to different aspects of the metaphoric concept in which we conceive of arguments as wars. The ARGUMENTS ARE WARS conceptual metaphor has as its primary function the cognitive role of understanding one concept (arguments) in terms of a different, often more familiar, concept (wars). Conceptual metaphors arise whenever we try to understand difficult, complex, abstract, or less delineated concepts, such as arguments, in terms of familiar ideas, such as wars. As Lakoff and Johnson wrote, "It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his decisions and defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies . . . Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war."[4]

Chris Matthews's commentary reflected a more specific instantiation of the ARGUMENTS ARE WARS conceptual metaphor by suggesting how political arguments may be a particular kind of competition, namely a boxing match.

Lakoff and Johnson forged a new path for the "metaphor in thought" thesis by providing extensive, systematic linguistic evidence showing that metaphors were both ubiquitous in language and had a major role in the creation and continued structuring of abstract concepts. Since 1980, an enormous body of empirical evidence from cognitive linguistics, and related disciplines, has emerged detailing how conceptual metaphors underlie significant aspects of language, and are evident in many nonlinguistic facets of life, including categorization and social judgments, bodily gestures, mathematics, music, art, dance, and material culture.

The range of fields that have conducted conceptual metaphor analyses is large and diverse, including linguistics, psychology, philosophy, computer science/AI, anthropology, education, neuroscience, communications, literature/literary studies, political science, mathematics, business/organizational studies/marketing, sociology, economics, law/legal studies, classics, architecture, nursing science, geography, history, theater arts, music, art/art history, dance, biology, physics, chemistry, religious studies, film and media studies, and Egyptology. Conceptual metaphor analyses have uncovered root systems of metaphors underlying theory and research in each of these academic fields, and have proven to be an invaluable tool for scholars with applied interests in first- and second-language learning, pedagogical practices, cross-cultural communication, advertising and marketing, doctor–patient interactions, psychotherapy, translation studies, and politics, to name just a few topics.

In many people's view, CMT is the most dominant theory within the large, diverse multidisciplinary world of metaphor research. The literary theorist and critic Wayne Booth wrote back in 1978, somewhat tongue in cheek, that the increasing interest in metaphor, even back at that time, suggests that by the year 2039, there will be more students of metaphor than people.[5] Although it is unclear if Booth's prophecy will come true, CMT is primarily responsible for the incredible popularity of metaphor within many academic fields and among certain lay audiences. A visit to any large metaphor conference, such as *Researching and Applying Metaphor (RaAM),* or a closer look at the pages of scholarly journals, such as *Metaphor and Symbol, Metaphor and the Social World, Metaphorik.de,* and *Cognitive Linguistics* will find most scholars working within the general framework of CMT, even if some people also have criticisms of the theory. Skeptics of CMT, including those who reject most of its assumptions and conclusions, still often acknowledge the tremendous influence that the "metaphor in thought" thesis has had on metaphor scholarship, as well as in larger debates about the nature of mind, meaning, and embodiment.

THE BROADER IMPACT OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Empirical research on conceptual metaphors has had major impact on four broad concerns in the humanities and cognitive sciences.

First, CMT has been a significant part of cognitive linguistics' program to offer a new way of thinking about linguistic structure and behavior. Abandoning the traditional generative approach to linguistics, one that embraces the autonomy of language from mind, cognitive linguistics explicitly seeks out connections between language and cognition, and more deeply, language and experiential action. This new vision of linguistics stresses the importance of incorporating empirical findings from a wide variety of cognitive and biological disciplines to create a theoretical description of language. CMT has been specifically important in uncovering the detailed contents of linguistic meaning and the relevance of embodied experience in structuring abstract concepts and symbols. Consequently, CMT provides a major alternative to classic modular views of language that see thought and language as separate architectural systems of the mind, with the body and mind occupying different realms of human experience. CMT shows how the study of metaphor offers insights into the overall unity of human conceptual structures, bodily experience, and the communicative, even aesthetic, functions of language.

Second, CMT offers a theoretical framework, and certain empirical evidence, for understanding the pervasiveness of metaphorical language and thought across a wide range of cognitive domains and cultural/linguistic environments. The traditional view of metaphors asserts that these figures express only temporary, "one-shot," construals of objects and ideas, as in "My lawyer is a shark," which do not necessarily impact the fundamental, literal contents of human thought and language. Under this perspective, metaphors may be extraordinarily useful in momentarily thinking about certain ideas in new ways, and communicating these thoughts in a vivid manner, although human knowledge is primarily constituted in disembodied, literal terms. Yet CMT demonstrates that metaphor is neither a rare, linguistic phenomenon nor merely a pragmatic aspect of language use. Instead, work originating within cognitive linguistics, and extending to many other fields, has revealed how metaphor should, at the very least, be recognized as a fundamental scheme of thought serving many cognitive, communicative, and cultural/ideological functions.

Third, the claim that significant parts of abstract thinking are partly motivated by metaphorical mappings between diverse knowledge domains has altered our scholarly conception of the relationship between thought and language. Prior to Lakoff and Johnson's first book, most discussions of language and thought dependencies were narrowly focused on questions related to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, particularly within the domain of color. Research in the cognitive sciences during the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated an increasing interest in semantic memory, and showed how conceptual knowledge was both necessary for language understanding and could be analyzed in various representational formats. But this work gave primary emphasis to the architecture of conceptual knowledge (e.g., the organization of semantic memory), and far less to the actual contents of what people know. Most notably, there were few attempts to explicitly model highly abstract knowledge domains (e.g., politics, scientific knowledge, ideas about the self, emotion concepts). CMT provides one way of thinking about how abstract concepts were established and influenced different domains of human thought, as well as ordinary language use and understanding.

Finally, CMT has been a leading force in what some refer to as the "second revolution" in cognitive science, namely the interest in the study of embodied cognition.[6] Cognitive linguistic analyses of language and gesture and psycholinguistics research, in particular, have played a prominent role in showing the significant degree to which metaphorical concepts are rooted within recurring patterns of bodily activity that serve as

source domains for people's metaphorical understandings of many abstract concepts. The great irony here is that metaphor, rather than emerging from rare, transcendent imaginative thought, provides evidence on the embodied foundation of abstract thinking and action. CMT significantly advances our understanding of the dynamic links between bodily experiences, and ubiquitous thought patterns about abstract topics, linguistic structure and behavior, and culture.

ATTACKING CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Despite its influence and popularity, there have been major criticisms of CMT beginning with the publication of *Metaphors We Live By,* and continuing to this day. These negative reactions to the "metaphor in thought" thesis have led to a series of battles among metaphor scholars, both within and across academic disciplines, which together constitute the metaphor wars that are the subject of this book.

Metaphor wars are fought by participants with many different motivations and goals. Some researchers wish to explore how metaphors reflect individual creativity, artistic traditions, and cultural motifs. Different scholars want to understand what metaphors reveal about people's communicative abilities in changing social circumstances. Other metaphor enthusiasts focus on the effects that metaphors have on people's thoughts, emotions, and interpersonal relationship. Still other researchers study the ways people interpret metaphorical meanings as a window into the nature of meaning, as well as conscious and unconscious human cognition.

Some of these varying interests stem from longstanding disciplinary concerns leading scholars to battle over whether CMT offers a satisfactory theory of meaning (for philosophers), insights into creativity and poetic practice (for literary scholars), an online account of people's immediate comprehension of verbal metaphor (for psycholinguists), or cultural models (for anthropologists). Yet metaphor wars do not easily group into disciplinary categories (e.g., linguistics vs. philosophy vs. psychology vs. literature) or into a simple distinction between scientists and humanists. Individual scholars are often attracted to the topic of metaphor precisely because of what it reveals about multiple facets of human experience. Speaking personally, studying metaphor is endlessly fascinating for its lessons about the interactions of embodiment, language, and thought, and its relevance to everything from culture and history to neurons and unconscious cognition. CMT has offered me a

way of understanding the emergence of meaning in both everyday life and spectacular realizations of the human spirit in art.

This complexity in how scholars approach the topic of metaphor may, however, accurately reflect the multitude of ways metaphor manifests itself in human experience. For this reason, there may never be a clear winner in the wars over conceptual metaphor. Such a conclusion should not sway us from trying to adjudicate some of the many disputes which continue to churn within the interdisciplinary world of metaphor scholarship. But resolving the debates about conceptual metaphor requires a comprehensive understanding of the vast empirical literature specifically designed to study CMT, and a sensitive analysis of why some scholars, nonetheless, react so negatively to the very idea of conceptual metaphors.

Consider again Chris Matthews's political commentary and his different boxing metaphors for the Obama vs. Romney debate. Did Matthews's choice of many conventional expressions necessarily indicate that he was thinking of the Presidential debate in a specific metaphorical manner? CMT scholars would argue that Matthews's speech, especially his systematic use of boxing metaphors, provides empirical evidence on the power of conceptual metaphors, such as POLITICAL DEBATES ARE BOXING MATCHES, in structuring people's thinking about abstract topics. But skeptics would likely respond that Matthews merely spit out a series of clichéd phrases which have littered the English language for some time. Politics just happens to be talked about in certain conventional ways, some of which originated in metaphorical thinking. Still, the fact that a contemporary speaker, such as Matthews, used particular words or phrases does not imply that he was cognitively drawing cross-domain comparisons between political debates and boxing matches.

The major argument in metaphor wars concerns the legitimacy of drawing inferences about human thought and experience from the analysis of what people say and write. How do we really know if a speaker's metaphorical talk necessarily indicates active metaphorical thought? Some scholars voice skepticism about the conclusions of CMT because of its reliance on pure intuition in their systematic analysis of conventional expressions, novel metaphors, and polysemy. They seek more scientific evidence, testing falsifiable hypotheses, to prove that so-called conceptual metaphors are "psychologically real," and not the mere fictions of cognitive linguistic analyses.[7]

Critics also typically do not believe that conventional phrases, such as "Romney will take some hard shots," count as legitimate metaphors because these are so common or clichéd.[8] Traditional metaphor

scholarship in many fields focuses on resemblance, or "A is B," metaphors, such as "Juliet is the sun," "Man is wolf," and "My surgeon is a butcher."[9] Certain cognitive linguistic analyses have been proposed for how people may interpret "A is B" metaphors, especially within conceptual "blending theory."[10] But the fact remains that most of the evidence in favor of CMT comes from an examination of metaphorical words and phrases that do not fit the traditional "A is B" form. For some, CMT appears to be too reductive, and spoils the cherished idea that metaphors, like "Juliet is the sun," are special, creative linguistic forms and aesthetically appealing precisely because of their active, poetic qualities.[11]

CMT is also faulted for its failure to offer reliable guidelines for determining how different linguistic expressions are necessarily motivated by particular conceptual metaphors.[12] What are the criteria for specifying how some linguistic statements, such as those listed above from *Metaphors We Live By,* directly point to the existence of one kind of conceptual metaphor (e.g., ARGUMENTS ARE WARS) as opposed to some other (e.g., DISPUTES ARE SHOOTING CONTESTS), or even no conceptual metaphor at all.

Some linguists, especially those working in applied areas (e.g., educational linguistics, literary analysis, corpus linguistics), voice concern about the difficulty of reliably identifying conceptual metaphors underlying naturalistic conversation and texts. The complexities of real-life discourse make it far more difficult to perform conceptual metaphor analyses compared to working with isolated, constructed linguistic examples frequently studied by cognitive linguists. Without explicit criteria for conceptual metaphor identification, critics see no reason to posit the existence of conceptual metaphors as either generalization about the language system or critical parts of the human cognitive unconscious.

Anthropologists and linguists similarly contend that CMT fails to properly acknowledge the cultural forces that shape metaphorical thinking and language.[13] The attempt to locate the cognitive and embodied, including neural, bases for metaphorical language, in many people's view, ignores the larger social and communicative goals that speakers and writers have when using metaphor, as well as the historical customs and ideological beliefs that may motivate some metaphoric discourses. Mathews's commentary, for instance, did not simply sprout from his private conceptual system, but emerged within a complex network of cultural understandings about Presidential campaigns and political debates. Efforts to ground linguistic metaphors in cognitive and, perhaps neural, structures miss the vital social nature of metaphorical speech acts.

In a different context, although much research from experimental psycholinguistics supports certain claims of CMT,[14] several psychological studies report evidence contrary to the idea that conceptual metaphors are automatically accessed when people use and interpret verbal metaphors.[15] These empirical results are consistent with arguments that many conventional expressions are not really motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors and, again, raise questions about the linguistic research in favor of CMT.

More recent claims by cognitive linguists, psychologists, and neuroscientists on the embodied nature of conceptual metaphors are also hotly debated within cognitive science.[16] For example, Matthews's boxing metaphors undoubtedly relate to people's bodily experiences when physically fighting, and many conceptual metaphors may be similarly grounded in recurring patterns of bodily sensation and action (e.g., LEADING A LIFE IS TAKING A PHYSICAL JOURNEY, UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, and CAUSES ARE PHYSICAL FORCES). Both psycholinguistic and cognitive neuroscience research offers empirical support that people experience bodily actions when using and interpreting many, but perhaps not all, verbal metaphors. Yet critics of embodied cognition, both within cognitive science and interdisciplinary metaphor studies, deplore the reduction of linguistic metaphor to bodily and brain processes.[17]

A brief look at a selection of statements critics have made about CMT illustrates some of the furor that has long fueled metaphor wars. These quotes are lifted from longer passages in which authors have gone to great lengths to articulate their complaints about specific features of CMT, what the theory ignores or trivializes, and how CMT often fails to address competing accounts of metaphorical language use and thought.

An early review of *Metaphors We Live By*, published by the linguist Anna Wierzbicka in 1986 raised several arguments in regard to Lakoff and Johnson's positioning of conceptual metaphor as a new, experientialist theory of meaning. Wierzbicka's main criticism focused on the book's glib dismissal of traditional perspectives on language and meaning. For example, she noted: "But what I find most disturbing about this book is the eagerness with which it seeks to cut itself off from the Western cultural heritage in general, and from Western traditions in the study of meaning, in particular." Later on, Wierzbicka argued that Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor specifically downplayed the importance of traditional semantic analyses to determine what words, including metaphoric ones, really mean: