Metaphors in the Mind

Abstract concepts are often embodied through metaphor. For example, we talk about moving through time in metaphorical terms, as if we were moving through space, allowing us to 'look back' on past events. Much of the work on embodied metaphor to date has assumed a single set of universal, shared bodily experiences that motivate our understanding of abstract concepts. This book explores sources of variation in people's experiences of embodied metaphor, including, for example, the shape and size of one's body, one's age, gender, state of mind, physical or linguistic impairments, personality, ideology, political stance, religious beliefs and linguistic background. It focuses on the ways in which people's experiences of metaphor fluctuate over time within a single communicative event or across a lifetime. Combining theoretical argument with findings from new studies, Littlemore analyses sources of variation in embodied metaphor and provides a deeper understanding of the nature of embodied metaphor itself.

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Sources of Variation in Embodied Metaphor

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For Dan, Joe, Oscar, Mum and Dad

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Preface

I would like to begin this book on a personal note. When I was eighteen years old, my father died. I was ill-equipped to deal with the emotional fallout that ensued. My over-riding memory of the time involves the sound of bagpipes. Not the sound of real bagpipes, but of bagpipes in my mind. I lived my life with the constant drone of bagpipes in the background. This became both the bass line and the baseline of my everyday experience. On bad days the tunes would start to play, and they would get louder and louder until they became unbearable and I would have to cover my ears. I have never been a fan of the bagpipes, metaphorical or otherwise. As this example shows, in addition to being something that we encounter, metaphor can also be something that we *experience* on a physical and emotional level whether we like it or not. In other words, metaphor can be 'embodied'.

The fact that we often experience meaning through our bodies is well established. According to the Embodied Cognition hypothesis (Rosch et al., 1991), our bodies, and the ways in which we use them to interact with the world and people around us, serve as a basis for the way in which we form ideas and communicate these ideas to others. In other words, our perceptual, motor and emotional experiences play a fundamental role in shaping how we talk about, think about and interact with people, objects and the world around us. Knowledge, therefore, is not acquired or processed in a vacuum. When we perceive an action taking place, we do not simply see or hear that action; we also 'experience' it bodily. More specifically, seeing an action leads to activation of parts of the brain that are involved in movement, processing of sensory stimuli and emotion.

Abstract concepts are also, to a large extent, embodied, often through metaphor, and our bodily interactions with the world around us provide motivation for the metaphorical ways in which we talk about abstract concepts and emotions. We learn to associate certain bodily experiences with particular abstract concepts and emotions, and this allows us to use one to metaphorically represent the other. This is why we often talk about moving through time as if it were moving through space, allowing us, for example, to 'look back on what

happened'.[1] It is why we talk about 'feeling down' when we are depressed, and why we talk about emotional closeness as if it were physical closeness. As we will see in this book, expressions such as these have the potential to provoke sensorimotor responses that correspond to the physical action of 'looking back' and to the physical experience of 'closeness'. This is what is meant by 'embodied metaphor' in its purest sense. Weaker versions of embodied metaphor involve the activation of our memory for, or knowledge of, felt, physical experiences that are then used to make sense of metaphors that draw on these experiences.

Much of the early work on embodied metaphor tended to assume a single set of universal, shared bodily experiences that motivate our understanding of abstract concepts. In recent years, it has been acknowledged that the culture we live in can impact on the ways in which embodied metaphors are extended and exploited, and research has shown that they vary across cultures. However, beyond this, there has been little investigation of other sources of variation. Factors such as environment and context, the shape and size of body, age, gender, physical or linguistic impairment, personality, ideology, political stance, religious beliefs and cultural and linguistic background all have the potential to impact on the way in which we form and use embodied metaphor. The aim of this book is to bring together all these different factors, and to combine theoretical argument with findings from studies that I have conducted alone and in collaboration with others, to explore how the variety of 'human experience' shapes the ways in which and the extent to which we acquire and use embodied metaphor. Throughout the book, I emphasise the dynamic interactive and contextual nature of embodied metaphor, and consider the ways in which it develops over time and in different contexts of use. By analysing the ways embodied metaphor varies across different individuals and contexts of use, my aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of embodied metaphor itself.

Eventually, the bagpipes quietened down but they would still resurface from time to time, reflecting the fact that although our felt experience of embodied metaphor is unavoidable and ubiquitous, there are times when we are more aware of it than others: embodied metaphor ebbs and flows over time. A second aim of this book is to offer explanations for this ebb and flow of embodied metaphor. In other words, as well as considering the ways in which the experience of metaphor varies across individuals, I will also look at the way in which it fluctuates over time within a given communicative event and across a lifetime.

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