

# The poetics of mind

Figurative thought, language,  
and understanding

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## *Chapter 1*

# **Introduction and overview**

Why should poetic imagination matter to cognitive science? An old but still prevailing view among students of mind holds that thought and language are inherently literal. Even though people can and do speak figuratively, the ability to think, imagine, and speak poetically has historically been seen as a special human trait, requiring different cognitive and linguistic skills than those employed in ordinary life. This traditional conception of mind has imposed serious limitations on both the scholarly study of mental life in cognitive science and the humanities and on everyday folk conceptions of human experience. We see the mind as a mirror of some God-given reality that can be best described in simple, nonmetaphorical terms, language that more closely reflects underlying “truths” about the world. Figurative or poetic assertions are distinct from true knowledge, a claim first made by Plato in his famous critique of poetry. To think or speak poetically is to adopt a distorted stance toward the ordinary world, one that is held in disdain by most philosophers, scientists, and educators.

This book advances the idea that the traditional view of mind is mistaken, because human cognition is fundamentally shaped by various poetic or figurative processes. Metaphor, metonymy, irony, and other tropes are not linguistic distortions of literal mental thought but constitute basic schemes by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world. Since every mental construct reflects an adaptation of the mind to the world, the language that expresses these constructs attests to the continuous process of poetic thinking.

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My emphasis in this book is on how figurative aspects of language reveal the poetic structure of mind.

Most discussions of figurative thought and language concern the interpretation of literature and poetry. Literary texts in particular are accepted as the most appropriate arena for the calculated risk of speaking figuratively. Sylvia Plath implicitly acknowledges this in a poem titled simply "Metaphors."

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded a train there's no getting off.

This poem mocks the familiar link between the physical state of pregnancy and the poet's art of analogy. The numerous quick-shifting metaphors emphasize different aspects of a pregnant woman's size, shape, fertility, value, the inevitability of her fate. At another level, these metaphors herald not just the impending birth of a child but the emergence of Plath's own poetic voice, noting that the female body is of literary interest as it continually gives birth to new relationships between the things in the world and the I of the poem. Together the metaphors in this poem form a riddle for the reader to interpret and appreciate. The risk for the poet or any producer of figurative language is that the audience may be unable to recognize what is meant from what is said. But when a poem is understandable, when it conveys new poetic insights about human experience, we credit its author with possessing special intellectual gifts. We praise writers such as Plath for their creative genius to think and express themselves figuratively.

It is a mistake, though, to think that using figurative language requires a special cognitive ability or that such language is encountered only in literary texts. Traditionally viewed as the tool of poets and politicians, figurative language is found

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not only in the treasured pages of literature but throughout ordinary speech and writing. The language of great poets is clearly more creative, or poetic, than that employed by most ordinary speakers. But both poets and ordinary people make use of the same figurative schemes of thought in saying what they do. Much of our everyday talk reflects people's ability to think in ways that go beyond the literal.

The merits of figurative thought and language have been fiercely debated since the time of the ancient Greeks. Even though the study of figurative thought and language is now a respectable topic in the humanities, arts, and cognitive sciences, there remains on the part of many scholars a deep mistrust toward all things figurative ("trophobia," or fear of tropes). Scientists, philosophers, educators, and psychologists have each, on occasion, rallied their forces against the supposed evils of figurative thought and language. For instance, some contemporary textbooks on writing and rhetoric warn that figurative language is at odds with clarity and literal thought and therefore must be repressed in the interest of making meaning transparent. As stated in one college textbook:

Figurative language . . . is tricky as it is useful. When you intend an abstract meaning, you must make sure that your metaphors stay good and dead. And when you wish to be figurative, see whether you are getting the necessary vividness and consistency. If not, go back to literal statement; it is better to make plain assertion than litter your verbal landscape with those strange hulks. (*Crews, 1984: 233*)

Such warnings about the misuse of figurative language might seem reasonable, given the often-noted mixed metaphors and twisted tropes that "litter" writing and speech. The *New Yorker* magazine often publishes amusing examples of misspun metaphors under the title "Block That Metaphor." Two such examples, both originally published in newspaper editorials, are:

(*Mobile, Ala.*) – In the dwindling twilight of a storm tossed Thursday, Charlie Graddick grabbed the burnished levers of

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political demagoguery to whip up a hometown crowd and breathe life into a bid for governor that has seen more switchbacks than a snaky mountain road. (Oct. 27, 1986, p. 115)

(*Montgomery, Ala.*) – The mayor has a heart as big as the Sahara for protecting “his” police officers, and that is commendable. Unfortunately, he also often strips his gears by failing to engage the clutch when shifting what emanates from his brain to his mouth. The bullets he fires too often land in his own feet. (Nov. 16, 1987, p. 146)

Most writing teachers tremble with horror at the sight of these twisted examples of figurative speech. Even though we understand what the original speakers must have intended with each of these examples, it seems perfectly reasonable to admonish students to be careful about mixing their metaphors.

Yet the problem of mixed metaphors is not the main reason why many scholars warn against the use of figurative speech in everyday and academic discourse. There are other significant, deeply entrenched reasons why figurative thought and language have been held in such suspicion throughout history. These reasons stem directly from the long-standing assumption, still in fashion in many areas of the cognitive sciences, that language is independent of cognition and that figurative language is only an embellishment of ordinary literal language with little cognitive value of its own. These beliefs are evident in two central philosophical commitments (G. Lakoff, 1990).

The first is the *Objectivist Commitment*: the commitment to the view that reality is made objectively of determinate entities with properties and relations holding among those entities at each instant. This is a commitment to a view that reality comes with a preferred description, and it is a commitment as to what reality is like. The second commitment is the *Fregean Commitment* (following Frege, 1892/1952): the commitment to understand meaning in terms of reference and truth, given the objectivist commitment. Semantics consists of the relationship between symbols and the objective world independent of the minds of any beings. In addition, the Fregean commitment views semantics as independent of prag-



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matics. That is, semantics (the relationship between symbols and things in the world) is defined so as not to take into account how those symbols and their interpretations might be used by people. Pragmatics (the relations between signs and their users) is viewed as the study of meaning in context. Both the Objectivist and Fregean commitments underlie the idea that literal meaning best reflects the objectively determined external world and is the primary mode for the description of truth. For this reason, semantics is still viewed in linguistics, logic, and philosophy as the study of literal meaning, whereas figurative meaning is relegated to the “wastebasket” of pragmatics.

Thinking of figurative language as a strictly pragmatic phenomenon perpetuates the traditional view that such speech is deviant or, at best, ornamental. Pragmatic accounts suggest that figurative language understanding is separate from “normal” or “ordinary” linguistic processing because of its heavy reliance on contextual, real-world knowledge. But there is now much research showing that our linguistic system, even that responsible for what we often conceive of as literal language, is inextricably related to the rest of our physical and cognitive system. Recent advances in cognitive linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology show that not only is much of our language metaphorically structured, but so is much of our cognition. People conceptualize their experiences in figurative terms via metaphor, metonymy, irony, oxymoron, and so on, and these principles underlie the way we think, reason, and imagine.

Consider the idea of love. Many of the creative uses of language that talk about love and other difficult concepts are themselves based on a much smaller set of cognitive models that constrain the way individuals think about and express their experiences. American speakers often talk of love in the following ways: *He was burning with love, I am crazy about her, We are one, I was given new strength by her love, The magic is gone, Don't ever let me go, She pursued him relentlessly*, and so on (Kovecses, 1986; G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Each of these expressions reflects particular ways that we think of love. For instance, *I was given new strength by her love, I thrive on love,*

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*He's sustained by love*, and *I'm starved for your affection* reflect the metaphorical concept of love as some kind of nutrient. The LOVE AS NUTRIENT conceptual metaphor has as its primary function the cognitive role of understanding one concept (love) in terms of another (nutrients). Conceptual metaphors arise when we try to understand difficult, complex, abstract, or less delineated concepts, such as love, in terms of familiar ideas, such as different kinds of nutrients.

Poetic verse about love often embellishes on more mundane ways of speaking of our love experiences (Gibbs, 1992a). One of my favorite examples comes from Emily Dickinson, who writes of love in a poem titled "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed":

I taste a liquor never brewed  
From tankards scooped in pearl.  
Not all the Frankfort berries  
Yield such an alcohol.

Inebriate of air am I  
And debauchee of dew,  
Reeling through endless summer days  
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee  
Out of the foxglove's door,  
When butterflies renounce their drams,  
I shall but drink the more,

Til seraphs swing their snowy hats  
And saints to windows run  
To see the little tippler  
From the manzanilla come!

Dickinson's poetic description of love as a *liquor never brewed* is an embellishment of the idea that love is a kind of nutrient, the same metaphorical mapping that motivates conventional expressions like *I'm drunk with love*, *He's sustained by love*, *I'm starved for your affection*, and so on. Creative individuals will often provide unique artistic instantiations of conceptual metaphors that partially structure our experiences.

But do metaphors *create* new insights into human experience? Or is it more accurate to say that metaphors reflect un-

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derlying schemes of thought that themselves are based on fundamental processes of figuration? My claim is that much of our conceptualization of experience is metaphorical, which both motivates and constrains the way we think creatively (G. Lakoff, 1987; G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; G. Lakoff & Turner, 1989). The idea that metaphor constrains creativity might seem contrary to the widely held belief that metaphor somehow liberates the mind to engage in divergent thinking. Yet it is misleading to assert that a creative poet like Dickinson has actually created a new metaphorical mapping between dissimilar domains when she has only made manifest some of the possibilities about love that are suggested by the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A NUTRIENT. Providing new ways of looking at the entailments of conceptual metaphor is itself a creative act. But the fundamental conceptualizations of experience that provide the grounds for these creative acts reflect the conventional metaphors we ordinarily live by.

Consider another metaphorical concept that structures part of our experience in the mundane world: ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER. This conceptual metaphor is actually one of the limited number of ways that people in Western cultures conceive of anger. Our understanding of anger (the source domain) as heated fluid in a container (the target domain) gives rise to a number of interesting entailments (Gibbs, 1990a; Kovecses, 1986; G. Lakoff, 1987). For example, when the intensity of anger increases, the fluid rises (*His pent-up anger welled up inside him*). We also know that intense heat produces steam and exerts pressure on the container (*Bill is getting hot under the collar* and *Jim's just blowing off steam*). Likewise, intense anger produces pressure in the container (*He was bursting with anger*). When the pressure in the container becomes too high, the container explodes (*She blew up at me*). Each of these metaphorical entailments is a direct result of the conceptual mapping of anger onto our understanding of heated fluid in a container.

What poets primarily do, again, is not create new conceptualizations of experience but talk about the metaphorical entailments of ordinary conceptual mappings in new ways. Consider this fragment from a poem titled "The

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Phenomenology of Anger," by Adrienne Rich.

Fantasies of murder: not enough:  
to kill is to cut off from pain  
but the killer goes on hurting

Not enough. When I dream of meeting  
the enemy, this is my dream:

white acetylene  
ripples from my body  
effortlessly released  
perfectly trained  
on the true enemy

raking his body down to the thread

of existence  
burning away his lie  
leaving him in a new  
world; a changed  
man.

Rich specifies the heated fluid representing anger as acetylene that she can focus as a weapon upon the object of her emotion. Her verse is beautifully poetic yet makes use of the same figurative modes of thought that motivate such common idioms as *blow your stack*, *flip your lid*, or *hit the ceiling* as well as such conventional expressions about anger as *His pent-up anger welled up inside him*. Rich's poem has great intuitive appeal for us precisely because she refers to, and elaborates upon, a common metaphorical view of anger.

My argument in this book is that our basic metaphorical conceptualizations of experience constrain how we think creatively and express our ideas in both everyday and literary discourse. The way we ordinarily speak, the way creative writers compose, is not unlimited. Yet the constraints on how we speak and write are not imposed by the limits of language but by the ways we actually think of our ordinary experiences. We do not, for example, arbitrarily talk about getting angry in terms of mowing lawns or buying apples but in terms such as blowing stacks, getting hot under the collar, exploding, and

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so on, because we metaphorically conceptualize our anger experiences (e.g., ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER). In this way, metaphor does not just help us see things in new ways. Metaphor constitutes much of our experience and helps constrain the way we think and speak of our ordinary lives. Many linguists, philosophers, literary theorists, and psychologists miss this important point because they fail to acknowledge the systematic conceptual underpinnings of the vast number of linguistic expressions that are metaphorical and creative. What is frequently seen as a creative expression of some idea is often only a spectacular instantiation of specific metaphorical entailments arising from a small set of conceptual metaphors shared by many individuals within a culture. Some of these entailments are products of highly divergent, flexible thinking. But the very existence of these entailments of concepts is motivated by underlying metaphorical schemes of thought that constrain, even define, the ways we think, reason, and imagine.

The metaphoric nature of everyday thought is not only seen in the work of great poets and in the mundane expressions of ordinary speakers but is also found in the ways people attach meanings to individual words. Take the phenomenon of polysemy, in which a single word has many related meanings. For instance, the word *stand* has many related senses, as seen in *The house stands in the field*, *He couldn't stand the pressure of his job*, *The law still stands*, *The barometer stands at 29.56*. Some of these meanings are based on the physical act of standing; others extend this central sense, sometimes metaphorically, to convey ideas about verticality (*She stood six feet tall*), resistance (*He stood up to the verbal attacks against his theory*), and endurance (*The law still stands*).

Traditional accounts in lexical semantics assume that some highly abstract set of features unifies all of a polysemous word's different meanings. According to this view, there must be some set of features that underlies each use of the word *stand*. However, for many polysemous words lexical semantics has failed to specify exactly what these abstract meanings are. On the other hand, new work in lexical semantics suggests that the meanings of many polysemous words can be

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explained in terms of basic metaphors that motivate, among other things, the transfer of English vocabulary from the domain of physical motion and object manipulation and location (*stand* in its physical sense) to various social and mental domains (*stand* in *He took a stand on the matter*).

To take another example, consider the common English word *see*, as in *I see the plane in the sky*, *I see what you're doing*, or *I see your point*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists numerous meanings for this word, ranging from "to perceive by the eye" to "to meet a bet in poker or to equal the bet." Most theories of word meaning suggest that *see* is a classic example of a dead metaphor. That is, speakers may at one time have metaphorically extended the literal meaning of *see*, meaning "to perceive by eye," to other meanings, such as "to know or understand." This metaphorical relationship between these two senses of *see* has presumably been lost over time, and speakers now understand the various meanings of *see* as being related to some highly abstract set of features.

But there is now good evidence in cognitive linguistics to suggest that many words that appear to be classic examples of dead metaphors actually have vitally alive metaphorical roots. For instance, in Indo-European languages, words meaning "see" regularly acquire the meaning "know" at various times and places (Sweetser, 1990). The dead-metaphor view of word meaning provides no explanation of why the same kinds of meaning change recur in the history of Indo-European languages. Yet one can easily explain such changes in terms of conceptual metaphors (ibid.). In the case of *see* words, there is a widespread and ancient conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, which is part of the more general MIND AS BODY metaphor. Because this metaphor exists in the conceptual systems of Indo-European-speakers, the conceptual mapping between seeing and knowing defines a "pathway" for semantic change, so that as new words for seeing develop, they eventually extend their meanings to knowing. The metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, like most other conceptual metaphors, actually shows why many words acquire multiple meanings that make sense to us as contemporary speakers. The recognition that polysemy is partly motivated by our metaphorical structur-

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ing of experience is a significant development for theories of lexical semantics. But this work most significantly provides additional evidence of the inextricable link between the figurative nature of everyday thought and the ordinary use of language.

Metonymy is another figurative mode of thought that is reflected in both literary and everyday language (G. Lakoff, 1987; G. Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Consider the following section of the book *E. M. Forster: A Life*, by P. N. Furbank (1978). This short paragraph provides an innovative personal account of Forster's daily life, represented almost entirely by metonyms.

. . . fine eyes, in steel-rimmed glasses, and a most expressive and sensitive mouth, by turns tremulous, amused, morally reproving or full of scorn. It was the mouth, one felt, of a man defending the right to be sensitive. Physically he was awkward, limp and still at the same time. He would stand rather askew, as it were, holding himself together by gripping his left hand in his right. By contrast his gestures were most graceful.  
(pp. 292–93)

This passage reflects the general cognitive principle of metonymy, or how people use one well-understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it. Forster's eyes, mouth, and gestures are contiguously presented, but we picture the entire man as unified through our ability to think metonymically.

Literary texts rely extensively on metonymy as a source of realism, exactness, and detail. A particular form of metonymy, called synecdoche, exchanges the name of the part for the whole. For example, at one point in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago pledges total loyalty to Othello. He calls upon the stars to

Witness, that here Iago doth give up  
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,  
To wrong'd Othello's service! (III. iii. 465–67)

*Wit*, *hands*, and *heart* are metonyms that stand for the familiar tripartite division of the self often expressed as mind, body, and soul. Synecdoches like these are so common as to verge

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on invisibility. But like realistic novelists or biographers, poets like Shakespeare rely heavily on synecdochic detail to evoke scene, characters, and cultural experience. The poet Philip Larkin, to take another example, evokes the past glories of racehorses in the following stanza from "At Grass."

Silks at the start: against the sky  
Numbers and parasols: outside,  
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,  
And littered grass: then the long cry  
Hanging unshushed till it subside  
To stop-press columns on the street.

Our understanding and appreciation of this poem depends on our ability to think metonymically: to recognize, for example, that *Silks at the start* refers to jockeys atop their mounts at the starting gate.

Although metonymy is primarily studied as a mode of discourse in literature and poetry, metonymy is a ubiquitous feature of everyday speech. Consider the following mundane examples (from G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Washington has started negotiating with Moscow.  
The White House isn't saying anything.  
Wall Street is in a panic.  
The Kremlin agreed to support the boycott.  
Hollywood is putting out terrible movies.

These examples are not isolated figures but all relate to the general metonymic principle by which a place may stand for an institution located at that place. Thus, a place like Hollywood stands for an institution located at that place, namely, the major motion picture studios. *The White House* stands for the president and the executive branch of the U.S. government.

There are a variety of conventional metonymic models that are quite common in ordinary discourse. We conceptualize AN OBJECT USED FOR THE USER (*The sax has the flu today, We need a better glove at third base*), THE CONTROLLER FOR THE CONTROLLED (*Nixon bombed Hanoi, Ozawa gave a terrible concert last night*), THE PLACE FOR THE EVENT (*Watergate changed our politics, Let's not*



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let El Salvador become another Vietnam), and THE AUTHOR FOR THE WORK (*Have you ever read any Hemingway?*). These metonymic models involve only one conceptual domain, in that the mapping or connection between two things is done within the same domain. Thus, referring to the movie industry by the place where movies are made maps a salient characteristic of one domain (its location) as representing the entire domain (the movie industry). In metaphor, on the other hand, there are two conceptual domains, and one is understood in terms of the other (e.g., love is understood as a kind of nutrient). Despite these differences in the kinds of mappings invoked, both metaphor and metonymy can be conventionalized, that is, made part of our everyday conceptual system. The fact that people easily use and understand metonymic expressions attests to the automatic, effortless, and unconscious way that people structure their experiences in terms of metonymic relations.

Metaphor and metonymy are two of the major figurative modes whereby people conceptualize their experience. Another figurative mode of thought, one that has been widely studied as a rhetorical figure but not as a fundamental aspect of our conceptual system, is irony. Speakers use irony frequently in their everyday speech, often in the form of sarcasm. For example, one person might say to another *A fine friend you are* after the addressee did something harmful to the speaker. We use sarcasm and irony for a variety of important interpersonal reasons (e.g., to be polite, to avoid responsibility for what we are saying). But we also speak ironically as often as we do because of a fundamental ability to conceptualize situations as being ironic. When someone says *It's a lovely day* in the midst of a rainstorm, the speaker signals his or her recognition of the incongruity between an expectation that the day will be nice and the reality of rain. In the same way, we judge some event as ironic because of an awareness of the incongruity between expectation and reality, even though other participants in the situation might be blind to what is really happening (often called dramatic irony). A wonderful example of this incongruity comes from the classic O. Henry short story "The Gift of the Magi." Each of

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a pair of newlyweds wanted to give the other a special gift for Christmas, but neither had any money. The only thing of value the wife owned was her beautiful long hair; the only valuable possession the husband had was a fine watch. To obtain funds to buy the present each wanted to give the other, the husband sold his watch to buy an ornate comb for his wife's hair, and the wife sold her hair to buy her husband a gold chain for his watch.

The ironic twist in this story is common to many situations in life. We conceptualize such situations as ironic and often comment on them in everyday discourse by speaking ironically. Writers have throughout history written in an ironic manner to convey their understanding of ironic situations. Consider the following recent example of the lyrics for a song titled "I need you," by the Eurythmics. The song is a ballad in which the singer Annie Lennox states:

I need you to pin me down  
Just for one frozen moment.  
I need you to pin me down  
So I can live in torment.  
I need you to really feel  
The twist of my back breaking.  
I need someone to listen  
To the ecstasy I'm faking.  
I need you you you

I need you to catch each breath  
That issues from my lips  
I need someone to crack my skull  
I need someone to kiss.  
So hold me now  
And make pretend  
That I won't ever fall  
Oh hold me down  
I'm gonna be your baby doll

I need you you you . . .  
Is it you I really need?  
I do I do I do  
I really do

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I need you . . .

As is the case with many ironic compositions, it is momentarily difficult to assess whether the speaker is being serious in saying what she does. But the singer Lennox, despite her heartfelt, sincere tone of voice, seems to be adopting the pretense of actually needing someone to treat her badly in the ways described in the song to show that she, and women in general, don't need such men in their lives. We understand the ironic message in the Eurhythmics song precisely because we recognize the incongruity between some reality and our expectations.

These observations about metaphor, metonymy, and irony illustrate some of the ways our use of everyday and poetic language reflects common schemes of figurative thought. This book describes in greater detail how people naturally think in poetic ways to make sense of their ordinary experiences and how poetic thought gives rise to the language we employ to express our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. My strategy in exploring the ubiquity of figurative thought in everyday experience and language adopts what might be called the *cognitive wager* (cf. H. Clark & Malt, 1984):

It is highly likely that most language universals are a result not of linguistically autonomous constraints but of constraints general to other cognitive functions. It is therefore appropriate a priori to assume that language universals are derived from general cognitive constraints and to leave it to others to prove otherwise.

This wager constrains me to adhere to two primary commitments: (a) a commitment to seek general principles governing all aspects of human language (the generalization commitment) and (b) a commitment to make my account of human language consistent with what is generally known about human cognition (the cognitive commitment) (G. Lakoff, 1990). I seek to explore the possibility that how we speak about our experiences is closely tied to ways we figuratively conceptualize our lives. This approach differs from that adopted by many cognitive scientists, who seek generalizations that are