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Zoltan Kövecses

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## Metaphor in Culture

### *Universality and Variation*

To what extent and in what ways is metaphorical thought relevant to an understanding of culture and society? More specifically, can the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor simultaneously explain both universality and diversity in metaphorical thought? Cognitive linguists have done important work on universal aspects of metaphor, but they have paid much less attention to why metaphors vary both interculturally and intraculturally as extensively as they do. In this book, Zoltán Kövecses proposes a new theory of metaphor variation. First, he identifies the major dimensions of metaphor variation, that is, those social and cultural boundaries that signal discontinuities in human experience. Second, he describes which components, or aspects, of conceptual metaphor are involved in metaphor variation and how they are involved. Third, he isolates the main causes of metaphor variation. Fourth, Professor Kövecses addresses the issue of the degree of cultural coherence in the interplay among conceptual metaphors, embodiment, and causes of metaphor variation.

Zoltán Kövecses is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University. He is the author of *Metaphor and Emotion* (2000) and *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2002).

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*For Lacika, Ádika, and Zsuzsi,  
with all my love*

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

The general question that I will be concerned with in this book is the following: *To what extent and in what ways is metaphorical thought relevant to an understanding of culture and society?*

Clearly, any answer to this question forces us to consider issues typically discussed in two broad ranges of disciplines: cognitive science and the social sciences. Typical representatives of the former include contemporary cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, whereas a chief representative of the latter is anthropology in its several forms (symbolic, cultural, semantic, etc.). Metaphor has been of great interest to many anthropologists since the very beginnings of the field (see, for example, Fernandez, 1986, 1991). The general difference between the two ranges of disciplines in the handling of metaphor seems to be a slightly different focus on what they find most important in the study of metaphor. Whereas scholars in cognitive science tend to ask, “What is metaphor?” and “How does it work in the mind?” scholars in the social sciences tend to focus on the issue of “What does metaphor do in particular social-cultural contexts?”

Many anthropologists working on issues related to metaphor had found new inspiration for their work in the cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor that was first developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their widely read book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). But it soon became clear that, although in many ways inspirational, this book (and much of the research that grew out of it; see Kövecses, 2002) does not in every way meet the needs



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of anthropologists. One major reason for this was that, as a general tendency, cognitive linguists have overemphasized the universality of some of the metaphorical structures that they found and ignored the many cases of nonuniversality in metaphorical conceptualization (Fernandez, 1991).

This situation presents cognitive scientists and linguists working on metaphor with a challenge: *Can the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor simultaneously explain both universality and diversity in metaphorical thought?* I wish to take up this challenge and argue on the basis of a wide range of data that the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor can successfully perform this job. To be sure, in order for it to accomplish the task, it needs to be modified, revised, and supplemented in several ways. My major goal in this work is to develop such an “updated” and relatively comprehensive theory of metaphor that makes the theory more readily useful to people working on issues in the social sciences.

However, this apparently straightforward enterprise involves working through a large number of issues that often concern anthropologists who have an interest in metaphor (see, for example, Fernandez, 1986, 1991; Foley, 1997; Kimmel, 2001, in press; Shore, 1996). Such issues include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Do metaphors interact with other tropes, and if they do, how?
- Is there a “master trope,” or are all tropes “equal”?
- How does the body provide for universality in metaphor, or does it do so at all?
- What’s the best methodology to get metaphorical data?
- Does metaphor create certain kinds of experience, or does it simply reflect a preexisting literally understood experience?
- Do “conceptual metaphors” vary from culture to culture, and if they do, how?
- How does metaphor contribute to the understanding of specific situated speech events in culture?
- How does metaphor create coherence or incoherence in culture?
- How can the study of metaphor provide a link between cognitive science and anthropology, and what kind of link can it provide?

I do not claim that I will deal with every one of these issues, or that I will deal with them in the same depth. However, I will discuss most of

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them in some detail, as well as some additional ones. The additional issues include the following:

- How do metaphors vary within (not just across) a culture?
- Do metaphors vary from person to person, and if they do, how?
- What are the causes of metaphor variation?
- What is the relationship between cross-cultural metaphor variation and translation?
- Are particular cultures characterized, or can they be characterized at all, by particular metaphors that “dominate,” or are characteristic of, a particular culture? That is to say, are there any cultural “master” metaphors?

The attempt to answer these questions in a coherent way promises, I feel, to lead to a fairly good basis for a theory that can account for both universality and variation in metaphor.

The enterprise that I am about to embark on is very much in the spirit of several recent book-length publications on similar or related issues concerning metaphor and figurative language in general – both by cognitive scientists and by anthropologists (see, for example, Gibbs, 1994; Holyoak and Thagard, 1996; Kimmel, 2001; Palmer, 1996; Shore, 1996). Mark Turner’s (2001) work is also important in this context; he examines the relevance of conceptual integration, or blending, to the study of social sciences. My goal is to do the same for metaphor. The present book, although sharing much of the background with these other works, has a unique focus in that it explores the issue of how and why conceptual metaphors are both universal and culture-specific, together with many of the concomitant questions mentioned previously.

In other words, this book is an attempt by me to make one possible version of the cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor more accessible to those who have an interest in studying the role of metaphor in complex social-cultural phenomena, such as emotions, politics, thought, and morality, as well as highly abstract cultural processes and entities such as time, life, and personhood. This way, I hope to continue the “debate” or dialog between cognitive linguists and anthropologists that was called for by James Fernandez more than 10 years ago (Fernandez, 1991: 8). I do not intend to do this by surveying the huge anthropological literature on metaphor; that would be a huge task

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in itself. Instead, I try to offer a reasonably comprehensive metaphor theory of what I take to be issues relevant to social scientists on the basis of the data that I have collected or that have been accumulated by other cognitive linguists interested in the issue of metaphor variation. Anthropologists and other social scientists can then judge whether the theory I arrive at is valid when compared with their theories based on their own data. This way we can begin to work together toward building a better account of the role of metaphor in understanding our own cultures and those of “others.”

In trying to accomplish my goals, I use certain concepts, such as culture, that can divide entire schools of anthropologists in a much less sophisticated way than many anthropologists would. After reading certain chapters of the book in manuscript form, my friend Susan Gal gently reminded me that my use of the term *culture* suggests that I think of culture as a “bounded entity,” a notion that is not really acceptable to many anthropologists today. My response to this is twofold: First, she is obviously right, but I find it very difficult to write about many of the issues discussed in the book without using phrases such as “this culture,” “a culture,” or “cultures.” My excuse then in this case is an entirely practical one. Second, and on second thought inspired by her comment, it seems to me that given my account of the data it is possible for me to maintain a position of culture that is closer to her views than she thinks. If some metaphors are universal, as I think some are, then we cannot neatly divide the human world into “bounded entity-like” cultures that exclude each other because the universal metaphors point to an “overarching,” or “underlying,” layer of cultural experience – over and above the metaphors that may be culture-specific. In addition, I will argue that metaphorical concepts are often embodied, and hence cultural understandings based on them are also embodied. This embodiment makes meaningful not only language but also a wider range of cultural practices. The conception of culture as embodied practice (see Foley, 1997) also goes against any “thinglike” interpretation of culture by me.

On this note, I want to thank all the friends, colleagues, and students who have helped me with their comments and ideas and volunteered many examples that are mentioned, described, and analyzed in this book. They are, in alphabetical order: Réka Benczes, Enikő Bollobás,

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