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# 3 Cognitive theory of metaphor

As a pilot study on representation of natural catastrophes in newspaper discourse has revealed that newspapers draw to a large extent on metaphor in their depiction of natural phenomena, one of the methods employed in the analytical part of the book is the cognitive theory of metaphor. This chapter first outlines the development of approaches towards metaphor, then delineates the cognitive theory of metaphor itself, and finally provides examples of recent studies on metaphor, which served as a source of inspiration for the present study.

## 3.1 Historical overview of approaches to metaphor

The origins of the study of metaphor can be traced back to ancient Greece, mainly Aristotle (fourth century BC), who viewed metaphor as implicit comparison, which is based on analogy (Ortony 1979, 3). According to Aristotle, the primary function of metaphor is stylistic and ornamental (Katz 1996). It is used for aesthetic reasons, mainly in poetry, to express a concept in an eloquent way. Aristotle also pointed out the persuasive function of metaphor, seeing it as an effective rhetorical figure to be employed in political discourse (Semino 2008). His view of metaphor forms the basis of the so-called comparison theory of metaphor. This approach sees metaphor as “a kind of comparison, a condensed simile” based on similarity (Martin and Harré 1982, 90). Thus, the metaphor:

*You are the light in my life.*

is viewed as a reduced version of :

*You are like the light in my life.*

The drawback of this perspective is that it ignores the important difference between a comparison and a categorization: while a simile emphasizes potential similarities between two concepts, a metaphor establishes the two concepts as having “in common something more than mere resemblances in that they belong to the same category sharing relevant features” (Cacciari 1998, 135). Moreover, the comparison theory sees metaphor as comparing two concepts, which have been seen as similar by the author prior to the use of metaphor, rather than constructing the similarities. It implies that metaphor is confined to phenomena rooted in actual or possible experience, neglecting the use of metaphor in science when referring to the world beyond all possible experience (Martin and Harré 1982, 90).

The second major theory is the substitution theory of metaphor. According to this approach, “metaphor is a way of saying what could be said literally” (Martin and Harré 1982, 90). In other words, metaphor can be substituted by a synonymous literal expression. Thus, the metaphor:

*He trumpeted out the news.*

can be replaced by:

*He told to anyone who wanted to listen.* (Werner 1975, 15)

It is rather a reductionist approach to metaphor, ignoring that it is a unique expression of meaning, all aspects of which cannot be accounted for by a literal substitute. Both the substitution theory and the comparison theory share the view of a metaphor as a matter of language; more specifically, as a matter of deviant language, with literal language being perceived as natural and conventional.

The third widely held approach to metaphor, founded by Max Black in the second half of the twentieth century, is the interaction theory of metaphor. Contrary to the comparison and the substitution theories, it does not treat metaphor as merely stating figuratively something that might have been said literally, but rather as constructing new meanings. It draws upon I. A. Richards’s work (1936), in which two influential terms, still used today, were introduced: vehicle, the source-domain meaning of a metaphor, and tenor, the target domain. According to the interaction theory (see Black 1979), metaphor consists of the principal and subsidiary subjects, corresponding to the metaphorical focus and the surrounding literal frame respectively. A metaphorical process is based on the projection of a set of associated implications from the secondary subject upon the primary subject. As Black (1979, 29) points out, “the maker of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject’s implicative complex.” As the name of the approach suggests, the interaction theory does not assume that it is only the secondary subject that has impact on the primary subject but rather that the influence is reciprocal, i.e., the primary subject brings about parallel changes in the secondary subject. For instance, in the metaphor ‘man is a wolf’, our knowledge and connotations about a man and wolves, e.g., they are wild and ruthless, interact to produce a new, irreplaceable vehicle of meaning (Martin and Harré 1982, 91). Importantly, the interaction theory does not see metaphor only as a matter of language but also points out the cognitive dimension of it.

None of the three theories has much currency in recent research on metaphor, which mainly draws upon the cognitive theory of metaphor. The main concepts of the cognitive theory, which follow some aspects of the interaction approach, mainly the recognition of the cognitive dimension of metaphor, are outlined in the next subchapter.

### 3.2 Main concepts of the cognitive theory of metaphor

The foundations of the cognitive theory of metaphor were laid down by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their influential work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Their key argument is that the metaphor forms an inherent part of our conceptual system – in their words, “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (1980, 3). Although the cognitive theory of metaphor tends to be described as radically new, the cognitive dimension of metaphor had been recognized by previous scholars. The interaction theory viewed metaphor as a mental process, and even before that a number of philosophers, including John Locke, Giambattista Vico, and Immanuel Kant, had discussed the cognitive implications of metaphor (Semino 2008).

Three main features characterize the cognitive theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994; Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005; Kövecses 2010):

1. The cognitive approach views metaphor not just as a matter of language, but as a matter of thought as well. Cognitive theorists argue that the metaphor is an important tool by means of which we conceptualize reality. This then has an impact on the way we behave and act.
2. In contrast to the substitution and the comparison theories that view metaphor as extraordinary and ornamental, the cognitive theory emphasizes that metaphor is a matter of ordinary, everyday language. A set of conventional metaphorical concepts is realized in the language that we use every day to speak about our experience, including abstract concepts, such as love and time.
3. Metaphor is defined as a mapping of structure from one conceptual domain, the source domain, to another conceptual domain, the target domain. This mapping is not based on similarity between the two concepts, as believed by the comparison theory of metaphor, but rather on the correlation of our experience in these two domains and our ability to structure one concept in terms of the other.

Cognitive theorists (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2010) argue that language serves as an evidence for the existence of conceptual metaphors since it is through everyday linguistic expressions that conceptual metaphors are realized. Thus, by analyzing discourse, we can arrive at metaphors by which we conceptualize aspects of discussed reality.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) distinguish three main types of metaphors: structural, orientational and ontological. Structural metaphors are metaphors in which

one concept is systematically structured in terms of another, as, for instance, in the classic example of the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, where “ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5). This conventional conceptual metaphor is realized in expressions such as *he always wins an argument* or *she attacked my argument*. Orientational metaphors provide a spatial orientation to a concept (up-down, front-back, etc.) – e.g., HAPPY IS UP versus SAD IS DOWN, realized in *she is in high spirits* versus *I feel low* (this metaphor has a physical basis as we are in an erect posture when we feel happy and in a drooping posture when we feel sad). Ontological metaphors make us view aspects of our experience in terms of entities and substances. A typical example is constituted by personification, which allows us to comprehend physical objects in terms of human characteristics and actions.

Although Lakoff and Johnson point out that metaphors are grounded in both our physical and cultural experience, their model of the cognitive theory has rightly been criticized for not taking fully into account cross-cultural perspectives and the role of cultural models in shaping our thinking (see Fernandez 1991; Dorbovol’skij and Piirainen 2005). Quinn (1991) contradicts Lakoff and Johnson’s assertion that metaphors constitute our understanding by claiming that it is mainly cultural models that shape the way we conceptualize and understand reality, with metaphors being simply chosen to match the already existing models in our mind. Quinn’s argument can be criticized for providing a rather one-way view of the relationship between culture, mind and metaphor. The relationship is more complex, with cultural models and metaphors interacting in the constitution of our understanding. There is a dialectical link between metaphors and cultural models: metaphors are shaped by existing cultural models and at the same time, they serve to reproduce or transform these models.

Another drawback of Lakoff and Johnson’s approach is the neglect of context. They view metaphors as “relatively fixed and universal patterns of thought;” yet, research on metaphor should rather pay attention to social, historical and political circumstances, as they “can have an important influence on the choice and specification of metaphors” (El Refaie 2001, 368). As Paul Chilton (1996) points out in his analysis of political discourse, metaphors are not pre-given but are rather constituted interactively.

An important aspect of metaphor is its multifunctionality. As stated by Gibbs (1994, 124), traditionally three functions of metaphor were recognized. The first one is the ability of metaphor to delineate ideas that would be very difficult, even impossible to express using literal language – the inexpressibility hypothesis. The second function of metaphor is to provide a compact and condensed way of communication – the compactness hypothesis, and the third function is to convey information in a vivid way – the vividness hypothesis. Drawing upon the cogni-

tive theory, another function of metaphor is that it enables us to comprehend complex and abstract aspects of reality in terms that are more concrete, familiar and easily imaginable (El Refaie 2001; Semino 2008). Furthermore, the metaphor fulfills a number of social functions, mainly to persuade, entertain and establish intimacy between the speaker and the hearer (Semino 2008). It also works as an effective ideological weapon due to the fact that by mapping structure from a source domain to a target domain, the metaphor necessarily foregrounds some aspects of the concept while hiding others.

### 3.3 Recent research on metaphor

This subchapter provides an overview of recent research on metaphor in discourse employing a critical cognitive approach. The studies commented on share the view of metaphor as shaping the way we conceptualize reality, being bound to a socio-historical context and being partly a cultural product.

The employment of metaphor has been extensively investigated in political discourse. George Lakoff (2004) claims that conservative and liberal political views are based on two different models of a family: a strict father family and a nurturing parent family, respectively. This stems from the existence of conceptual metaphors: NATION IS A FAMILY, GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT and CITIZENS ARE THE CHILDREN (Musolff 2004, 2). Paul Chilton focuses on the examination of the employment of metaphor in discourse during and after the Cold War, pointing out that the political transition discourse following the Cold War was marked by the metaphor of the COMMON EUROPEAN HOUSE (Chilton and Ilyin 1993; Chilton 1996). Elena Semino and Michela Masci (1996), while investigating metaphor in the political discourse of Silvio Berlusconi, reveal that Berlusconi employs mainly metaphors the source domains of which are FOOTBALL, WAR and the BIBLE, in an attempt to create a positive image for himself and his party, and to justify his political actions. The football metaphor takes advantage of the positive connotations that football as a national sport has for Italians, aiming to establish national unity. The war metaphor is chosen to establish Berlusconi as a national leader that is capable of protecting his country, and the Bible metaphor is mainly drawn upon to appeal to the voters who are Catholic. Charteris-Black (2005) studies persuasion in political speeches (such as speeches by Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr. and George W. Bush) as performed by a choice of metaphors in combination with other rhetorical devices.

Another major domain in which research on metaphor has been carried out is newspaper discourse. Lule (2004) studied metaphors in newspaper articles published in the six weeks before the second war in Iraq, finding out that among the most common and recurring metaphor themes in the reports are: TIMETABLE,

GAMES OF SADDAM, PATIENCE OF THE WHITE HOUSE and SELLING THE PLAN. Lule emphasizes that these metaphors, both consciously and unconsciously, structured people's experience and determined their actions. El Refaie (2001) examines the use of conceptual metaphors in the portrayal of asylum seekers. She points out that the major metaphor themes – WATER, CRIMINALS and an INVADING ARMY – are repeatedly employed in newspaper discourse using conventional lexis and entrenched grammatical patterns, which results in the naturalization of the metaphor themes. El Refaie emphasizes that it is the forms of language through which metaphors are realized that influence the degree to which the metaphor themes come to be viewed as a commonsensical representation of reality, with, for example, compounding playing an important role in the process of naturalization. Santa Ana (1999) reveals that American public discourse dehumanizes immigrants by drawing upon the metaphor IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS, which becomes naturalized as it is routinely employed without drawing attention to itself.

The last study to be mentioned is Koller's (2004) analysis of metaphors describing women managers in business magazines. She reveals that the major metaphor theme employed is the WAR metaphor, which reproduces the dominant paradigm of hegemonic masculinity.

Such studies reveal, on the analysis of concrete linguistic material, the power of metaphor to shape our conceptualization of certain aspects of reality by constructing a naturalized portrayal that conveys particular ideologies.