Metaphor

Metaphor has been traditionally viewed as characteristic of language as opposed to thought, and has been seen as occurring primarily in poetic as opposed to everyday language. Since the late 1970's, it has become clear that everyday language is thoroughly suffused with metaphor and that the proper locus of metaphor is in our conceptual system, where it plays a major role in characterizing the structure of abstract concepts, permitting us to understand the logic of abstract concepts in terms of the logic of more concrete concepts. Metaphor is secondarily reflected in language, where metaphorical linguistic expressions reflect metaphorical thought.

Each metaphor is a structural mapping from one conceptual domain to another. When a metaphor is conventional, it forms a part of our everyday understanding of experience and is processed automatically, effortlessly, and without notice. For example, QUANTITY is understood metaphorically in terms of VERTICALITY, where MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN. Hence, prices may *rise, go up, skyrocket* or *fall* and *hit bottom*. Here VERTICALITY is referred to as the "source domain," while QUANTITY is referred to as the "target domain." (In earlier terminology, "vehicle" was used for source domain and "topic" for target domain.) It is important to distinguish the many individual words and phrases that express the metaphor (e.g., *rise, fall, skyrocket*) from the metaphor itself, which is a conceptual mapping from VERTICALITY to QUANTITY.

The number of everyday conventional metaphors is very large, but most go unnoticed because they are so common and effortless. For example, ACTION is understood metaphorically in terms of MOTION (I'm really moving along on this project), with PURPOSES AS DESTINATIONS (The end is in sight, We've come a long way, We're almost there), LACK OF PURPOSE AS LACK OF DIRECTION (He's drifting, He needs direction), MEANS AS PATHS (Find another way), and IMPEDIMENTS TO ACTION AS IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION (He's stuck, He's weighed down with problems, He's at an impasse, It's been uphill all the way).

Even the concept of communication is understood via a metaphor—the Conduit Metaphor, in which IDEAS ARE OBECTS, WORDS ARE CONTAINERS, and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING IDEA-OBJECTS IN WORD-CONTAINERS. Hence, if you are good at *putting ideas into words*, it is more likely that you can *get them across*. The idea that words have meanings *in* them is a consequence of the Conduit Metaphor.

Poetic metaphors make use of everyday metaphorical thought, either by extending everyday metaphors or by combining them. For example, there is a conventional metaphor in which BEING ALIVE is understood as BEING HERE, BIRTH as ARRIVAL, and DEATH as DEPARTURE. Hence, we speak of a baby as "being on the way" or as just having "arrived," of someone who survives a near-fatal accident as "still being with us," and someone who dies as "leaving us," or "passing away," or as the "dear departed." There is another conventional metaphor in which A LIFETIME IS A DAY and DEATH IS NIGHT. Hence, we speak of the "springtime of youth" and of "our twilight years." The

conventional death-as departure and death-as-night metaphors are combined in Dylan Thomas' famous line "Do not go gentle into that good night" to yield a novel metaphorical expression.

There are hundreds of such conceptual metaphors and the abstract concepts in our conceptual systems are, on the whole, structured via such metaphors. But metaphors can not only project the structure of one concept onto another. They can also project the structure of one image onto another. For example, Andre Breton writes of "My wife, whose waist is an hourglass." Here the conventional image of an hourglass is mapped onto the conventional image of a woman's waist. Such image-metaphors are common in poetry, but also occur in everyday language, as in the word *dunk*, whose meaning was extended metaphorically from the dipping of pastries into liquids to the domain of basketball, via an image-metaphor that mapped the rim of the cup onto the rim of the basket, the pastry onto the basketball, and the hand motion onto the corresponding hand motion. Image-metaphors are also structural mappings, but instead of mapping the structure of one concept onto another, they map the the internal structure of one conventional mental image onto the internal structure of another image. Image-metaphors thus tend to provide the basis for single linguistic expressions (e.g., "dunk"), while conceptual metaphors provide the basis for whole semantic fields of expressions (e.g., prices *rose, fell, hit bottom, leveled off*, and so on).

Conventional metaphors, on the whole, have a rather detailed structure. They have specified source and target domains (e.g., VERTICALITY and QUANTITY), and specific correspondences between source domain elements and

target domain elements (e.g., UP corresponds to MORE and DOWN corresponds to LESS). There are, however, conventional metaphors that do not have such specific constraints. They are referred to as "generic-level metaphors." An example is the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor, which construes events that occur as actions performed by some metaphorical agent. This metaphor is responsible for a large range of personifications. For example, in the adage "Time cures all ills," the event of healing is understood as the action of curing performed by the metaphorical agent, Time. The EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor can apply to any domain at all, so long as the source is an action and the target is an event. But it is also very tightly constrained; it does not allow an event to be understood in terms of just any action. For example, though paying is an action, "Patients pay for all illnesses" is not a metaphorical way of understanding healing. Paying is not an appropriate action for metaphorically characterizing healing. There are general principles that explain why. In general, the permissible actions must be taken from the same domain of experience as the event (e.g., curing is in the same domain as healing). In addition, the action must preserve certain aspects of semantic structure (called "generic-level" structure) in that domain. Generic-level structure includes causal structure, temporal structure, number of entities, modalities (like *must* and *can*), and so on. Time is permitted as an agent because "Time cures all ills" expresses the idea that time, like an agent that cures, plays the principal causal role in healing. All generic-level metaphors are constrained so as to preserve generic-level semantic structure in this manner.

The generic-level metaphor with the widest applicability is the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor. It enables one to understand any of a category of situations in terms of the generic-level structure of a single specific situation. For example, our knowledge about rain has the following generic-level structure: It is an externally-produced effect that is beneficial in moderate, but not in excessive, amounts. "When it rains, it pours" says literally that, whenever it rains at all, the rain occurs only in the excessive, nonbeneficial quantity. Metaphorically, "When it rains, it pours" can be said of any situation with that generic-level structure, where an externally produced effect that is beneficial only in normal quantities is occurring in excessive quantities. Here, the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor applies to the specific case of rain, and maps it onto any of a class of situations with the same generic-level structure.

In general, metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that permits one to take highly structured knowledge of concrete situations and to use it to comprehend other situations which are more abstract. It is thus central to the human capacity for abstract reason.

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