METAPHOR

A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION
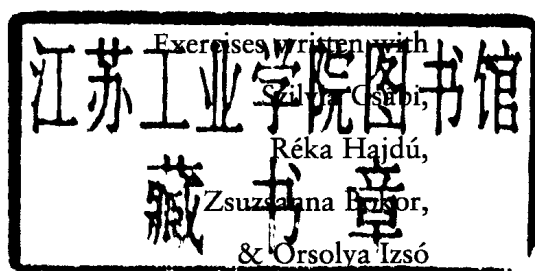
ZOLTÁN KÖVECSES

M E T A P H O R

A Practical Introduction

ZOLTÁN KÖVECSES

Exercises written with
Szilvia Csábi,
Réka Hajdú,
Zsuzsanna Bokor,
& Orsolya Izsó

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2002

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

To

GEORGE

&

MARK

Preface:
The Study of
Metaphor

For most of us, metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another by saying that one is the other, as in *He is a lion*. Or, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* puts it: "*metaphor* [is a] figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities, as distinguished from *simile*, an explicit comparison signalled by the words 'like' or 'as.'" [emphases in the original]. For example, we would consider the word *lion* to be a metaphor in the sentence "Achilles was a *lion* in the fight." We would probably also say that the word is used metaphorically in order to achieve some artistic and rhetorical effect, since we speak and write metaphorically to communicate eloquently, to impress others with "beautiful," esthetically pleasing words, or to express some deep emotion. Perhaps we would also add that what makes the metaphorical identification of Achilles with a *lion* possible is that *Achilles* and *lions* have something in common, namely, their bravery and strength.

Indeed, this is a widely shared view—the most common conception of metaphor, both in scholarly circles and in the popular mind (which is not to say that this is the *only* view of metaphor). This traditional concept can be briefly characterized by pointing out five of its most commonly accepted features. First, metaphor is a property of words; it is a linguistic phenomenon. The metaphorical use of *lion* is a characteristic of a linguistic expression (that of the word *lion*). Second, metaphor is used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose, such as when Shakespeare writes "all the world's a *stage*." Third, metaphor is based on a resemblance between the two entities that are compared and identified. Achilles must share some features with lions in order for us to be able to use the word *lion* as a metaphor for Achilles. Fourth, metaphor is a conscious and deliberate use of words, and you must have a special talent to be able to do it and do it well. Only great poets or eloquent speakers, such as, say, Shakespeare and Churchill, can be its masters. For instance, Aristotle makes the following statement to this effect: "The great-

est thing by far is to have command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius." Fifth, it is also commonly held that metaphor is a figure of speech that we can do without; we use it for special effects, and it is not an inevitable part of everyday human communication, let alone everyday human thought and reasoning.

A new view of metaphor that challenged all these aspects of the powerful traditional theory in a coherent and systematic way was first developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 in their seminal study: *Metaphors We Live By*. Their conception has become known as the "cognitive linguistic view of metaphor." Lakoff and Johnson challenged the deeply entrenched view of metaphor by claiming that (1) metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words; (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts, and not just some artistic or esthetic purpose; (3) metaphor is often *not* based on similarity; (4) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, not just by special talented people; and (5) metaphor, far from being a superfluous though pleasing linguistic ornament, is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning.

Lakoff and Johnson showed convincingly that metaphor is pervasive both in thought and everyday language. Their insight has been taken up by recent dictionary preparers as well. For instance, *Cobuild's Metaphor Dictionary* has examples of metaphors, such as the following (metaphorical expressions in the example sentences or phrases are italicized):

(1) He was an *animal* on Saturday afternoon and is a disgrace to British football.
(2) There is no painless way to get inflation down. We now have an excellent *foundation on which to build*.
(3) Politicians are being blamed for the *ills* of society.
(4) The *machinery* of democracy could be *created* quickly but its spirit was just as important.
(5) Government grants have enabled a number of the top names in British sport *to build* a successful career.
(6) ... a local *branch* of this organization.
(7) Few of them have the qualifications ... *to put an ailing* company *back on its feet*.
(8) The Service will continue *to stagger from* crisis *to* crisis.
(9) Her career was *in ruins*.
(10) How could any man ever understand the *workings* of a woman's mind?
(11) Scientists *have taken a big step* in understanding Alzheimer's disease.
(12) They selectively *pruned* the workforce.
(13) ... *cultivating* business relationships that can lead to major accounts.
(14) The coffee was perfect and by the time I was halfway through my first cup my brain *was ticking over much more briskly*.
(15) Let's hope he can *keep* the team *on the road to* success.
(16) Everyone says what a happy, *sunny* girl she was.

(17) It's going to be a *bitch* to replace him.
(18) The province is quite close to *sliding into* civil war.
(19) They remembered her as she'd been *in the flower* of their friendship.
(20) Vincent met his father's *icy* stare evenly.
(21) With its economy *in ruins*, it can't afford to involve itself in military action.
(22) ... French sex *kitten* Brigitte Bardot.

Some of these examples would be considered by most people to be obvious cases of metaphor, while some of them would perhaps be considered less obvious. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that most of the metaphorical linguistic expressions above are not literary and that most of them are not intended to exhibit some kind of rhetorical flourish. Indeed, most of them are so mundane that a very commonly heard charge can be leveled at them— namely, that they are simply "dead" metaphors—metaphors that may have been alive and vigorous at some point but have become so conventional and commonplace with constant use that by now they have lost their vigor and have ceased to be metaphors at all (such as 6 and 13).

The "dead metaphor" account misses an important point; namely, that what is deeply entrenched, hardly noticed, and thus effortlessly used is most active in our thought. The metaphors above may be highly conventional and effortlessly used, but this does not mean that they have lost their vigor in thought and that they are dead. On the contrary, they are "alive" in the most important sense—they govern our thought—they are "metaphors we live by." One example of this involves our comprehension of the mind as a machine. In the list above, two sentences reflect this way of thinking about the mind:

(10) How could any man ever understand the *workings* of a woman's mind?
(14) The coffee was perfect and by the time I was halfway through my first cup my brain *was ticking over much more briskly*.

We think of the mind as a machine. Both lay people and scientists employ this way of understanding the mind. The scientists of today use the most sophisticated machine available as their model—the computer. Lakoff and Johnson call this way of understanding the mind THE MIND IS A MACHINE metaphor. In their view, metaphor is not simply a matter of words or linguistic expressions but of concepts, of thinking of one thing in terms of another. In the examples, two very different linguistic expressions capture aspects of the same concept, the mind, through another concept, machines. In the cognitive linguistic view as developed by Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is conceptual in nature. In this view, metaphor ceases to be the sole device of creative literary imagination; it becomes a valuable cognitive tool without which neither poets nor you and I as ordinary people could live.

This discussion is not intended to suggest that the ideas mentioned above in what we call the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor did not exist before

1980. Obviously, many of them did. Key components of the cognitive theory were proposed by a diverse range of scholars in the past two thousand years. For example, the idea of the conceptual nature of metaphor was discussed by a number of philosophers, including Locke and Kant, several centuries ago. What is new, then, in the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor? Overall, what is new is that it is a comprehensive, generalized, and empirically tested theory.

First, its comprehensiveness derives from the fact that it discusses a large number of issues connected with metaphor. These include the systematicity of metaphor; the relationship between metaphor and other tropes; the universality and culture-specificness of metaphor; the application of metaphor theory to a range of different kinds of discourse such as literature; the acquisition of metaphor; the teaching of metaphor in foreign language teaching; the nonlinguistic realization of metaphor in a variety of areas such as advertisements; and many others. It is not claimed that these issues have not been dealt with at all in other approaches; instead, the claim is that not all of them have been dealt with within the same theory.

Second, the generalized nature of the theory derives from the fact that it attempts to connect what we know about conceptual metaphor with what we know about the working of language, the working of the human conceptual system, and the working of culture. The cognitive linguistic view of metaphor can provide new insights into how certain linguistic phenomena work, such as polysemy and the development of meaning. It can also shed new light on how metaphorical meaning emerges. It challenges the traditional view that metaphorical language and thought is arbitrary and unmotivated. And offers the new view that both metaphorical language and thought arise from the basic bodily (sensorimotor) experience of human beings. As it turns out, this notion of "embodiment" very clearly sets off the cognitive linguistic view from the traditional ones.

Third, it is an empirically tested theory in that researchers have used a variety of experiments to test the validity of the major claims of the theory. These experiments have shown that the cognitive view of metaphor is a psychologically viable one, that is, it has psychological reality. Further experiments have shown that, because of its psychological reality, it can be seen as a key instrument not only in producing new words and expressions but also in organizing human thought, and that it may also have useful practical applications, for example, in foreign language teaching. I will try to deal with most of these topics in this book, although as can be expected from a book of this sort, I will only be able to offer a glimpse of them.

Up until most recently, metaphor has been primarily studied by philosophers, rhetoricians, literary critics, psychologists, and linguists, such as Aristotle, Hume, Locke, Vico, Herder, Cassirer, Buhler, I. A. Richards, Whorf, Goodman, Max Black, to mention just a few names from the thousands of people who have done work on metaphor over the past two thousand years. Today, an increasing number of cognitive scientists, including cognitive linguists, engage in the research on metaphor. The reason is that metaphor plays

a role in human thought, understanding, and reasoning and, beyond that, in the creation of our social, cultural, and psychological reality. Trying to understand metaphor, then, means attempting to understand a vital part of who we are and what kind of world we live in.

Lakoff and Johnson initiated this new study of metaphor over twenty years ago. In fact, it was their work that has defined in part cognitive linguistics itself as we know it today. Many scholars from a variety of disciplines have since contributed to this work over the years and have produced new and important results in the study of metaphor. What has exactly happened in the past two decades in the cognitive linguistic study of metaphor? This is what this book is about.

FURTHER READING

If you want to read up on the background to the study of metaphor, in general, including some of the scholars mentioned above, the best available collection of essays is Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (1993), second edition. What makes this volume especially important reading is that it contains several essays that represent rival views to the cognitive linguistic one. This is also the time to begin to read George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, the work that "started it all." An excellent survey of the view of metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson and others is Ray Gibbs (1994). This work also discusses a great deal of psychological evidence supporting the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor. Jäkel (1999) provides a useful survey of the most important predecessors of the cognitive linguistic view. If you are interested in the history of the study of metaphor, you should look at Mark Johnson's (1981) *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor.* The most recent representative collection of papers in the cognitive spirit is the volume edited by Gibbs and Steen (1999). The metaphor dictionary referred to above is *Cobuild English Guides, 7: Metaphor* (1995).

Acknowledgments

Contents

METAPHOR

1

What Is
Metaphor?

C onsider the way native speakers of English often talk about life—either
their own lives or those of others:

> People might say that they try to give their children an education so they
> will get a good start in life. If their children act out, they hope that they
> are just going through a stage and that they will get over it. Parents hope
> that their children won't be burdened with financial worries or ill health
> and, if they face such difficulties, that they will be able to overcome them.
> Parents hope that their children will have a long life span and that they
> will go far in life. But they also know that their children, as all mortals,
> will reach the end of the road. (based on Winter, 1995, p. 235)

This way of speaking about life would be regarded by most speakers of English
as normal and natural for everyday purposes. The use of phrases such as *to
get a good start, to go through a stage, to get over something, to be burdened,
to overcome something, a long life span, to go far in life, to reach the end of
the road*, and so on would not count as using particularly picturesque or lit-
erary language. Below is a list of additional phrases that speakers of English
use to talk about the concept of life:

> He's *without direction* in life.
> I'm *where I want to be* in life.
> I'm *at a crossroads* in my life.
> She'll *go places* in life.
> He's never *let* anyone *get in his way*.
> She's *gone through* a lot in life.

Given all these examples, we can see that a large part of the way we speak
about life in English derives from the way we speak about journeys. In light
of such examples, it seems that speakers of English make extensive use of the

3

domain of journey to think about the highly abstract and elusive concept of life. The question is: Why do they draw so heavily on the domain of journey in their effort to comprehend life? Cognitive linguists suggest that they do so because thinking about the abstract concept of life is facilitated by the more concrete concept of journey.

I. Conceptual Metaphor

In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. (The issue of precisely what is meant by "understanding" will be discussed in section 3.) Examples of this include when we talk and think about life in terms of journeys, about arguments in terms of war, about love also in terms of journeys, about theories in terms of buildings, about ideas in terms of food, about social organizations in terms of plants, and many others. A convenient shorthand way of capturing this view of metaphor is the following: CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B), which is what is called a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience. Thus, for example, we have coherently organized knowledge about journeys that we rely on in understanding life. We will discuss the nature of this knowledge below.

We thus need to distinguish conceptual metaphor from metaphorical linguistic expressions. The latter are words or other linguistic expressions that come from the language or terminology of the more concrete conceptual domain (i.e., domain B). Thus, all the expressions above that have to do with life and that come from the domain of journey are linguistic metaphorical expressions, whereas the corresponding conceptual metaphor that they make manifest is LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The use of small capital letters indicates that the particular wording does not occur in language as such, but it underlies conceptually all the metaphorical expressions listed underneath it.

The two domains that participate in conceptual metaphor have special names. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the target domain. Thus, life, arguments, love, theory, ideas, social organizations, and others are target domains, while journeys, war, buildings, food, plants, and others are source domains. The target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain.

2. Some Examples of Conceptual Metaphor

To see that we do indeed talk about these target domains by making use of such source domains as war, journey, food, let us consider some classic ex-

amples of each from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. Following the conventions of cognitive linguistics, I will use small capitals for the statement of conceptual metaphors and italics for metaphorical linguistic expressions.

AN ARGUMENT IS WAR
Your claims are *indefensible.*
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target.*
I *demolished* his argument.
I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
If you use that *strategy,* he'll *wipe* you *out.*
He *shot down* all of my arguments.

LOVE IS A JOURNEY
Look *how far* we've *come.*
We're *at a crossroads.*
We'll just have to *go our separate ways.*
We can't *turn back* now.
I don't think this relationship is *going anywhere.*
Where are we?
We're *stuck.*
It's been a *long, bumpy road.*
This relationship is a *dead-end street.*
We're just *spinning our wheels.*
Our marriage is *on the rocks.*
We've *gotten off the track.*
This relationship is *foundering.*

THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS
Is that the *foundation* for your theory?
The theory needs more *support.*
We need *to construct* a *strong* argument for that.
We need *to buttress* the theory with *solid* arguments.
The theory will *stand or fall* on the *strength* of that argument.
So far we have *put together* only the *framework* of the theory.

IDEAS ARE FOOD
All this paper has in it are *raw* facts, *half-baked* ideas, and *warmed-over* theories.
There are too many facts here for me *to digest* them all.
I just can't *swallow* that claim.
Let me *stew* over that for a while.
That's *food* for thought.
She *devoured* the book.
Let's let that idea *simmer on the back burner* for a while.

This is just a small sample of all the possible linguistic expressions that speakers of English commonly and conventionally employ to talk about the target domains above. We can state the nature of the relationship between