

Metaphor in Discourse

Elena Semino

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Lancaster University



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521686969

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First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Semino, Elena, 1964–

Metaphor in discourse / Elena Semino.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-86730-6 (hardback)

1. Metaphor. I. Title.

PN228.M4S38 2008

808 – dc22 2008014088

ISBN 978-0-521-86730-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68696-9 paperback

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Metaphor in Discourse

'Metaphor' is the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else. In this book Elena Semino discusses metaphor as a common linguistic occurrence, which is varied in its textual appearance, versatile in the functions it may perform, and central to many different types of communication, from informal interaction to political speeches. She discusses the use of metaphor across a variety of texts and genres from literature, politics, science, education, advertising and the discourse of mental illness. Each chapter includes detailed case studies focusing on specific texts, from election leaflets to specialist scientific articles. Also included is a detailed consideration of corpus (computer-based) methods of analysis. Wide-ranging and informative, this book will be invaluable to those interested in metaphor from a range of disciplines.

ELENA SEMINO is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University. Her previous publications include *Cognitive Stylistics: Language and Cognition in Text Analysis* (2002, edited with J. Culpeper) and *Corpus Stylistics: Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation in a Corpus of English Writing* (2004, with M. Short).

To Jonathan, Emily and Natalie

Acknowledgements

I have greatly enjoyed writing this book. In large part, this has been because my ideas have developed in the course of many conversations and collaborations with friends and colleagues at Lancaster University and around the world. I cannot mention everybody here, but a few people deserve special thanks.

Over the last eight years, I have benefited from many hours of discussion with the other nine members of the 'Pragglejaz' metaphor group. I am particularly indebted to Gerard Steen for originally creating the group and inviting me to join.

More concretely, John Heywood patiently read the whole manuscript, made many invaluable comments and, on several occasions, saved me from potential embarrassment. Maria Bortoluzzi, Alice Deignan and Veronika Koller gave me some useful feedback on individual chapters. Sofia Lampropoulou transcribed the radio programme discussed in chapter 5, and Gerard Hearne helped me with the final stages of proofreading. Ben Barton at Billington Cartmell went well beyond the call of duty in order to ensure that I obtained permission to reproduce the advertisement discussed in chapter 5.

The book was completed in reasonable time thanks to a Research Leave grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number: AH/E503683/1). I am grateful to Andreas Musolf for his help with the application process.

Helen Barton at Cambridge University Press was exceptionally helpful and supportive at all stages in the development of the book.

Although I enjoyed working on the book, I enjoyed even more taking breaks from it in order to spend time with my extended families in Italy and England, and especially with Jonathan, Emily and Natalie. The girls, in particular, make sure that I never take myself too seriously by being healthily unimpressed with the 'boring' things I write. I will, of course, make it my mission to try to change their minds. In the meantime, I sincerely hope that the readers of this book will disagree with my daughters.

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(Manchester: Carcanet, p. 32); Steve Bell for permission to reproduce the cartoon discussed in chapter 3; Lucozade for permission to reproduce the advertisement discussed in chapter 5.

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Abbreviations

BNC	British National Corpus
CMT	Cognitive Metaphor Theory
MIP	Metaphor Identification Procedure

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1 Introduction: studying metaphor in discourse

1.1 Some preliminaries

Let me begin by reflecting on the title of this book, *Metaphor in Discourse*. By ‘metaphor’ I mean the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else. For example, in the expression ‘the war against drugs’, the attempt to reduce the number of people who take drugs is talked about in terms of war. This may both reflect and reinforce a particular way of thinking about difficult enterprises (and specifically actions and policies relating to drug abuse) in terms of aggression and military action. I will be more precise about the definition of metaphor below. By ‘discourse’, as the term is used in the title, I mean naturally occurring language use: real instances of writing or speech which are produced and interpreted in particular circumstances and for particular purposes.

In the course of the book, I discuss metaphor as a pervasive linguistic phenomenon, which is varied in its textual manifestations, versatile in the functions it may perform, and central to many different types of communication, from informal interaction through political speeches to scientific theorizing. More specifically, I explore the forms and functions of metaphor in a variety of texts and genres on a range of different topics; I consider the relationship between individual uses of metaphor in specific contexts and conventional metaphorical patterns in language generally; I emphasize the tendency towards an interaction between conventionality and creativity in metaphor use in a variety of different genres; and I reflect on the important but controversial relationship between metaphorical uses of language on the one hand, and mental representations and thought on the other.

The approach adopted in the book is best introduced with reference to a concrete example. On 8 July 2005, an article by James Landale appeared on the website of the UK version of BBC News with the headline ‘Half full or half empty?’ (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4665923.stm for the full text). The article is concerned with the aftermath of the G8 summit which had just taken place in Gleneagles in Scotland, and which had been concerned with initiatives to relieve poverty in Africa and to halt climate change. The

summit had received unusually high amounts of media attention due to the involvement of rock stars Bob Geldof and Bono, who had been raising public awareness and lobbying governments to ensure that substantial commitments would be made by the G8 leaders (the article was accompanied by a photograph of Geldof and Bono walking with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan). Geldof and Bono had also organized a series of high-profile pop concerts throughout the world on the eve of the summit (Live 8), in order to mobilize public opinion as with the Live Aid concert Geldof had organized ten years before to raise funds for the victims of famine in Ethiopia.

The article focuses particularly on the customary debate that follows events of this kind, in which different people give different assessments of the outcome of the discussions, some more positive, others more negative. I have chosen it for discussion here because of the prominent role that metaphor plays in it. In the opening of the article, the reporter explicitly states that, after all the activities and negotiations, the summit had finally come down to 'a battle of metaphors':

- 1.1 In the end, after all the talks, the lobbying and the haggling over words, the G8 summit at Gleneagles came down to a battle of metaphors.

Just how best should the work over the last three days at this Scottish golf course and equestrian centre be characterised?

Was, asked some, the cup half full or half empty?

Indeed, as I will show, the prominent individuals whose statements are quoted in the article use different metaphors to convey their own views and evaluations of what had been achieved. The headline of the article itself also exploits a conventional metaphorical expression ('half full or half empty?') to sum up the way in which the same set of decisions is being presented by some as a success and by others as a failure.

1.1.1 *Metaphor and rhetorical goals*

The 'story' in the article is represented by the different views expressed by a variety of people about the decisions made by the G8 leaders. In particular, the article includes several direct quotations from statements in which three prominent individuals use different metaphors to express contrasting assessments of the outcome of the summit. In a series of separate quotations, Bono is reported as describing what has been achieved and what remains to be done in terms of the climbing of a series of mountains:

- 1.2 'A mountain has been climbed,' declared the U2 rock star Bono, who alongside his comrade in alms Bob Geldof, has been lurking on the fringes of this summit.

But, he said, and it was a big 'but' that was echoed by the army of charity workers and aid lobbyists here.

'A mountain has been climbed only to reveal higher peaks on the other side,' continued Bono.

Not wanting to sound too negative, he continued: 'But let's also look down on the valley from where we've come.'

The expression 'a mountain has been climbed' metaphorically constructs the G8 summit in terms of a difficult, but ultimately successful mountainous ascent, while the following reference to 'higher peaks on the other side' presents the remaining problems as further mountains that need to be climbed.¹ In the invitation to 'look down on the valley from where we've come' Bono constructs the pre-summit situation in terms of the lower position from which the metaphorical climb began, and suggests that it is now appropriate to experience the same sense of achievement that climbers feel when they look at the valley below from the top of a mountain.

The opinions expressed by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was one of the G8 leaders, are also presented via quotations in which he describes what has been achieved in terms of movement. On the issue of climate change, he is reported as saying that there is a 'pathway to a new dialogue', and, on the summit generally, as insisting that:

- 1.3 'Politics is about getting things done step by step, this is progress, and we should be proud of it.'

Here expressions such as 'pathway to' and 'getting things done step by step' positively construct what has been achieved in terms of movement forward ('step by step') or in terms of entities that make movement forward possible ('pathway'). However, these expressions also suggest that what has been done is part of a longer process rather than the final, desired outcome.

In contrast, a representative of an anti-poverty group is quoted as negatively assessing the G8 summit in comparison with the Live 8 concert via a metaphor to do with sound:

- 1.4 Dr Kumi Naidoo, from the anti-poverty lobby group G-Cap, said after 'the roar' produced by Live 8, the G8 had uttered 'a whisper'.

The reference to 'roar' could be a nonmetaphorical description of the sound made by the crowd at the concert. However, the use of 'whisper' in relation to the summit is clearly a (negative) metaphorical description of the outcome of the discussions in terms of a sound characterized by lack of loudness. Hence, the contrast in loudness between the sounds indicated by 'roar' and 'whisper'

¹ The noun 'summit' itself derives from the Latin 'summum' (which means 'highest'), and can also mean 'top of a mountain' in contemporary English. In other words, the sense of the noun that is relevant in the article (that of a meeting among leaders) is metaphorically derived from the physical notion of an elevated position. We can only speculate, however, on whether Bono's choice of metaphor was partly inspired by the physical meaning of 'summit'.

is used metaphorically to establish a contrast between the strength of feeling and commitment expressed by the concert audiences and the lack of resolve and effectiveness shown by the G8 leaders.²

All three quoted speakers use metaphor to contribute to their own rhetorical goals, which go beyond simply expressing their opinions in an effective way. Both Bono and Blair had been heavily involved in the G8 summit, albeit in different ways, and were therefore faced with a fine balancing act when asked to judge its outcome: on the one hand, they had to claim some degree of success, in order not to lose face themselves and not to damage the prospects of future constructive collaboration with others; on the other hand, they had to recognize that success had not been complete, in order to preserve their credibility and to emphasize that those involved needed to be prepared for further efforts. Interestingly, both achieved this rhetorical balancing act via metaphorical references to having successfully completed *part* of a journey. Dr Naidoo, in contrast, had no direct involvement with the summit, and represented an organization whose goal is to put pressure on governments on the issue of world poverty. Her choice of metaphor, therefore, expresses disappointment, and emphasizes the contrast between the decisions of politicians and the aspirations of ordinary people at the concert.

Aristotle famously described ‘a command of metaphor’ as ‘the mark of genius’ (Cooper 2005). While we may hesitate to use the word ‘genius’ in relation to the three speakers quoted in the article, each of them does show skill and experience in using metaphor to convey their views succinctly, vividly and effectively, and to provide the media with easily quotable material. However, the article also shows that the ‘genius’ Aristotle talked about is not limited to politicians or media personalities. The article’s author, James Landale, does not just notice that a contrast in metaphors would make a nice news story, but also effectively uses metaphor himself: for example, he describes the contrasting metaphors used by different individuals as a ‘battle’ (see extract above), and exploits the conventional metaphorical opposition between seeing a cup as half full or half empty to provide a catchy headline for his piece. In fact, a closer look at the various metaphorical expressions I have discussed reveals that the ‘genius’ of their producers lies in exploiting to maximum effect some of the metaphors that are commonly used by speakers of English generally.

1.1.2 *Metaphor, conventionality and thought*

The metaphorical uses of language that are attributed to Bono, Blair and Dr Naidoo in the article are sufficiently striking for the reporter to have noticed

² It is interesting that here the metaphorical noun phrases ‘the roar’ and ‘a whisper’ are the only parts of Dr Naidoo’s statement that are quoted directly, via a technique that has been described as ‘embedded quotation’ (see Semino and Short 2004: 153–9).

their destination), and patterns of inferences (e.g. if someone reaches the end of a cul-de-sac they cannot continue to move forward) (see Lakoff and Turner 1989: 63–4).³ Conventional sets of metaphorical expressions such as those given in lists 1.5 and 1.6 are seen as linguistic realizations of conventional conceptual metaphors: the expressions in list 1.5 are presented as linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphor *ARGUMENT IS WAR*, where *WAR* is the source domain and *ARGUMENT* is the target domain; the expressions in list 1.6 are presented as linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*, where *JOURNEY* is the source domain and *LIFE* is the target domain.⁴ The *ARGUMENT IS WAR* conceptual metaphor involves correspondences between participants in arguments and opponents or enemies, strategies in arguments and attack or defence, the outcomes of arguments and victory or defeat, and so on. Similarly, in the *LIFE IS A JOURNEY* metaphor, people correspond to travellers, actions to forward movement, choices to crossroads, problems to impediments to travel, and purposes to destinations. Importantly, new structure can be projected from source to target domain. Consider, for example, the conventional metaphorical construction of time as a resource, and, more specifically, as money, which is linguistically realized by expressions such as ‘You’ve used up all your time’ and ‘I’ve invested a lot of time on that project’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 161–4). Some of the material that is projected from the *RESOURCE/MONEY* source domains is not necessarily part of the *TIME* target domain independently of the metaphor. This applies, for example, to the notions that time can be ‘saved’ or ‘wasted’ (see Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 252–3). This view of metaphor, which is currently the dominant paradigm in metaphor studies, is known as ‘Cognitive’ or ‘Conceptual’ Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT) (see also Gibbs 1994; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Kövecses 2002).⁵

Cognitive metaphor theorists emphasize that target domains typically correspond to areas of experience that are relatively abstract, complex, unfamiliar, subjective or poorly delineated, such as time, emotion, life or death. In contrast, source domains typically correspond to concrete, simple, familiar, physical and well-delineated experiences, such as motion, bodily phenomena, physical objects and so on. This applies particularly clearly to the *LIFE IS A JOURNEY* conceptual metaphor, where the target domain (*LIFE*) is relatively more complex and abstract than the source domain (*JOURNEY*). Moreover, the

³ Other terms for general mental representations are roughly equivalent to ‘domain’, such as ‘schema’, ‘script’ and ‘frame’.

⁴ Small capitals are conventionally used to indicate conceptual metaphors and to refer to conceptual domains. The same convention will be used throughout this book.

⁵ In this book I do not have the space to discuss in detail the ways in which CMT has been developed in recent years, but see, for example, Grady (1997a), Lakoff and Johnson (1999) and Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 242–76).