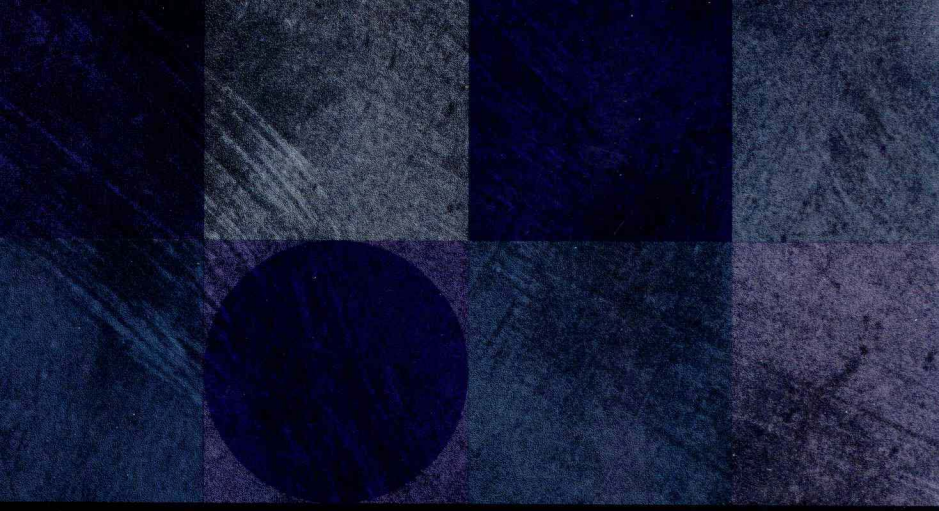

METAPHORS WE LIVE BY

GEORGE LAKOFF
AND MARK JOHNSON

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

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Preface

This book grew out of a concern, on both our parts, with how people understand their language and their experience. When we first met, in early January 1979, we found that we shared, also, a sense that the dominant views on *meaning* in Western philosophy and linguistics are inadequate—that "meaning" in these traditions has very little to do with what people find *meaningful* in their lives.

We were brought together by a joint interest in metaphor. Mark had found that most traditional philosophical views permit metaphor little, if any, role in understanding our world and ourselves. George had discovered linguistic evidence showing that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought—evidence that did not fit any contemporary Anglo-American theory of meaning within either linguistics or philosophy. Metaphor has traditionally been viewed in both fields as a matter of peripheral interest. We shared the intuition that it is, instead, a matter of central concern, perhaps the key to giving an adequate account of understanding.

Shortly after we met, we decided to collaborate on what we thought would be a brief paper giving some linguistic evidence to point up shortcomings in recent theories of meaning. Within a week we discovered that certain assumptions of contemporary philosophy and linguistics that have been taken for granted within the Western tradition since the Greeks precluded us from even raising the kind of issues we wanted to address. The problem was not one of extending or patching up some existing theory of meaning

but of revising central assumptions in the Western philosophical tradition. In particular, this meant rejecting the possibility of any objective or absolute truth and a host of related assumptions. It also meant supplying an alternative account in which human experience and understanding, rather than objective truth, played the central role. In the process, we have worked out elements of an experientialist approach, not only to issues of language, truth, and understanding but to questions about the meaningfulness of our everyday experience.

Berkeley, California
July 1, 1979

Acknowledgments

Ideas don't come out of thin air. The general ideas in this book represent a synthesis of various intellectual traditions and show the influence of our teachers, colleagues, students, and friends. In addition, many specific ideas have come from discussions with literally hundreds of people. We cannot adequately acknowledge all of the traditions and people to whom we are indebted. All we can do is to list some of them and hope that the rest will know who they are and that we appreciate them. The following are among the sources of our general ideas.

John Robert Ross and Ted Cohen have shaped our ideas about linguistics, philosophy, and life in a great many ways.

Pete Becker and Charlotte Linde have given us an appreciation for the way people create coherence in their lives.

Charles Fillmore's work on frame semantics, Terry Winograd's ideas about knowledge-representation systems, and Roger Schank's conception of scripts provided the basis for George's original conception of linguistic gestalts, which we have generalized to *experiential gestalts*.

Our views about family resemblances, the prototype theory of categorization, and fuzziness in categorization come from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Eleanor Rosch, Lotfi Zadeh, and Joseph Goguen.

Our observations about how a language can reflect the conceptual system of its speakers derive in great part from the work of Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and others who have worked in that tradition.

Our ideas about the relationship between metaphor and ritual derive from the anthropological tradition of Bronislaw

Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and others.

Our ideas about the way our conceptual system is shaped by our constant successful functioning in the physical and cultural environment come partly from the tradition of research in human development begun by Jean Piaget and partly from the tradition in ecological psychology growing out of the work of J. J. Gibson and James Jenkins, particularly as represented in the work of Robert Shaw, Michael Turvey, and others.

Our views about the nature of the human sciences have been significantly influenced by Paul Ricoeur, Robert McCauley, and the Continental tradition in philosophy.

Sandra McMorris Johnson, James Melchert, Newton and Helen Harrison, and David and Ellie Antin have enabled us to see the common thread in aesthetic experience and other aspects of our experience.

Don Arbitblit has focused our attention on the political and economic implications of our ideas.

Y. C. Chiang has allowed us to see the relationship between bodily experience and modes of viewing oneself and the world.

We also owe a very important debt to those contemporary figures who have worked out in great detail the philosophical ideas we are reacting against. We respect the work of Richard Montague, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Donald Davidson, and others as important contributions to the traditional Western conceptions of meaning and truth. It is their clarification of these traditional philosophical concepts that has enabled us to see where we diverge from the tradition and where we preserve elements of it.

Our claims rest largely on the evidence of linguistic examples. Many if not most of these have come out of discussions with colleagues, students, and friends. John Robert Ross, in particular, has provided a steady stream of examples via phone calls and postcards. The bulk of the examples in chapters 16 and 17 came from Claudia Brugman, who also gave us invaluable assistance in the prepara-

tion of the manuscript. Other examples have come from Don Arbitblit, George Bergman, Dwight Bolinger, Ann Borkin, Matthew Bronson, Clifford Hill, D. K. Houlgate III, Dennis Love, Tom Mandel, John Manley-Buser, Monica Macauley, James D. McCawley, William Nagy, Reza Nilipoor, Geoff Nunberg, Margaret Rader, Michael Reddy, Ron Silliman, Eve Sweetser, Marta Tobey, Karl Zimmer, as well as various students at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Many of the individual ideas in this work have emerged from informal discussions. We would particularly like to thank Jay Atlas, Paul Bennaceraf, Betsy Brandt, Dick Brooks, Eve Clark, Herb Clark, J. W. Coffman, Alan Dundes, Glenn Erickson, Charles Fillmore, James Geiser, Leanne Hinton, Paul Kay, Les Lamport, David Lewis, George McClure, George Rand, John Searle, Dan Slobin, Steve Tainer, Len Talmy, Elizabeth Warren, and Bob Wilensky.

Contents

METAPHORS WE LIVE BY

1

Concepts We Live By

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like.

Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. And we have found a way to begin to identify in detail just what the metaphors are that structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do.

To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday activity, let us start with the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

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.

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.

Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing

ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But *we* would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. It would seem strange even to call what they were doing "arguing." Perhaps the most neutral way of describing this difference between their culture and ours would be to say that we have a discourse form structured in terms of battle and they have one structured in terms of dance.

This is an example of what it means for a metaphorical concept, namely, ARGUMENT IS WAR, to structure (at least in part) what we do and how we understand what we are doing when we argue. *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.* It is not that arguments are a subspecies of war. Arguments and wars are different kinds of things—verbal discourse and armed conflict—and the actions performed are different kinds of actions. But ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured.

Moreover, this is the *ordinary* way of having an argument and talking about one. The normal way for us to talk about attacking a position is to use the words "attack a position." Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. The metaphor is not merely in the words we use—it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things.

The most important claim we have made so far is that metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical. This is what we mean when we say that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system. Therefore, whenever in this book we speak of metaphors, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, it should be understood that *metaphor* means *metaphorical concept*.

2

The Systematicity of Metaphorical Concepts

Arguments usually follow patterns; that is, there are certain things we typically do and do not do in arguing. The fact that we in part conceptualize arguments in terms of battle systematically influences the shape arguments take and the way we talk about what we do in arguing. Because the metaphorical concept is systematic, the language we use to talk about that aspect of the concept is systematic.

We saw in the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor that expressions from the vocabulary of war, e.g., *attack a position, indefensible, strategy, new line of attack, win, gain ground,* etc., form a systematic way of talking about the battling aspects of arguing. It is no accident that these expressions mean what they mean when we use them to talk about arguments. A portion of the conceptual network of battle partially characterizes the concept of an argument, and the language follows suit. Since metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way, we can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and to gain an understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities.

To get an idea of how metaphorical expressions in everyday language can give us insight into the metaphorical nature of the concepts that structure our everyday activities, let us consider the metaphorical concept TIME IS MONEY as it is reflected in contemporary English.

TIME IS MONEY

You're *wasting* my time.
This gadget will *save* you hours.