

How metaphors structure domains of activity

Successful metaphors are constitutive of domains of activity (e.g., Schoen, 1979). For example, ethical debates about the implications of ‘deciphering the book of life’ act upon, rather than question, the assumption that establishing a person’s DNA-sequence tells you as much about that person as reading a book tells you about the contents of that book.

But what is it that gives some metaphors this significance? Why has the computer-metaphor of mind become constitutive of Cognitive Psychology? Why are temporal relationships spatialised in similar ways across many languages? Most recent research has aimed to answer this question by ‘locating’ a presumably ‘fundamental’ process in metaphorical meaning and understanding – the ‘basis’ of metaphor, so to speak. Some approaches have emphasised the social aspects of metaphorical meaning, and have argued that successful metaphors are ‘socially situated’ (e.g., Zinken, Hellsten, & Nerlich, 2008). Other approaches have emphasised the primacy of particular brain structures in accounting for the success of some metaphors. This is particularly true for Evolutionary Psychologists (e.g., Pinker, 2007) and Conceptual Metaphor Theorists (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

In this talk, the parallels between these otherwise opposing standpoints will be outlined. Both approaches share the problem that they assume that metaphorical meaning is somehow ‘there’ in the relevant structure (the cultural model or the brain). Taking a closer look at this ‘conduit metaphor’ of meaning (Reddy, 1993 [1979]) reveals that generalising metaphorical utterances into cultural models, or neuronal networks, is only an apparent explanation of a metaphor’s success. An alternative approach will be outlined here, which analyses successful metaphors as elements in a history of discourse.

This perspective avoids troublesome dichotomies such as that between the cognitive and the social, and has consequences for theories of metaphor meaning. In particular, consequences for theorising about the universality of some metaphors will be highlighted.

References

- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pinker, S. (2007). *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. London: Allen Lane.
- Reddy, M. J. (1993 [1979]). The conduit metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about language. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 164-201). Cambridge: CUP.
- Schoen, D. A. (1979). Generative Metaphors: A Perspective on Problem Solving in Social Policy. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (pp. 254-283). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zinken, J., Hellsten, I., & Nerlich, B. (2008). Discourse metaphors. In R. Dirven, R. Frank & E. Bernardez (Eds.), *Body, Language, and Mind: Sociocultural Situatedness* (Vol. 2). Berlin: Mouton.