Understanding metaphors in everyday language

Hauptseminar “Introduction to Cognitive Grammar”
Christoph Haase
WS 2001/ 02

30. März 2002

Denise Reck

9. Semester, Magister
1. Introduction

For many people, metaphors are a means of poets or writers, in other words, creative people. Just a few people are aware of the fact that we actually use metaphorical expressions every day. It depends on the view everybody has what someone thinks about it.

The aim of this paper is to show that metaphors are omnipresent in our everyday language and that we are using them almost constantly, maybe unconsciously. The focus is on the work of Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors we live by*, one of the first that brought the approach of omnipresent metaphors.

Before looking on this theory, there will be an overview of definitions as a start into that topic. Functions of metaphors, where already the omnipresence of metaphors will be indicated.

After presenting Lakoff’s and Johnson’s approach, there will be a presentation of some fields where metaphors can be used and where, again, the presence of metaphors is proved.

A last chapter is dedicated to an own little investigation of everyday language for metaphors which is suppose to be a support for the theory presented before.

The whole paper is supposed to introduce a picture of metaphors in our everyday language and how they are used there.

2. Metaphors – basic definitions

2.1 Definitions

Before we can start testing every-day life language for metaphors, one has to define first what this language phenomenon actually means.

There are several definitions *Metaphors* are, above all, means of figurative language, an indirect comparison without a word showing this comparison, e.g. the word *like*. Aristotle who was first to provide a scholarly treatment of *metaphors* gives a more detailed definition of the term *metaphor*.

He said that a *metaphor* “consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genius to species, or from species

\footnote{Cf. Korte et al., *Einführung in die Anglistik*: 113}
to genus, or from species to species, or on the ground of analogy."\(^2\) I. A. Richards went further. He gave a terminology which is still used nowadays when talking about *metaphors*. For him a metaphor has two terms, called *topic* and *vehicle*. The latter one is the term used metaphorically. These two terms have a relationship called *ground*.\(^3\) All these definitions have in common that they speak of two terms which are related to each other because of the similarities they have. But they also limit the function of *metaphors* to embellish the language.\(^4\)

There are other analysts who broadened the functions, namely George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their investigation *Metaphors we live by*. They proved that metaphors are omnipresent and indispensable in every-day-language.\(^5\) But before going on to this specific topic, the question why using metaphors will be tried to answered in the next chapter.

### 2.2 Why metaphors are used\(^6\)

Scholars, e.g. Fainsilber or Ortony, have found out three reasons why metaphors are used. First, there is the so-called *inexpressibility hypothesis*. That means that metaphors are used for expressions that are not easy to explain with literal language. This refers mostly to abstract ideas. An example would be: *The thought slipped my mind like a squirrel behind a tree.*

Another example would be: *Her eyes sparkled like the stars in the sky.*\(^7\)

The second reason is called *compactness hypothesis*. This hypothesis says that people can express ideas more detailed and compact with metaphors. With the sentence *My love is like a blossom bouquet of roses*, one can describe *love* as sweet, beautiful,… just by comparing it to flowers. With the other sentence *Lawyers can be like sharks*,\(^8\) you can show that lawyers are dangerous, vicious and greedy just by using one word which includes this characteristics compactly.

The last hypothesis, called vividness hypothesis, says that by metaphors, expressions are made more clear and livened up. You can see this in the expression *My love is like a blooming bouquet of roses*, with that you can see the experience

\(^2\) quoted in Gibbs, *The poetics of mind*: 210
\(^3\) cf. Gibbs: 211
\(^5\) cf. Lakoff/Johnson, *Leben in Metaphern*: 11,12; Baldauf: 15
\(^6\) as long as there is no other indication, this chapter including examples is based on Gibbs: 124-126
\(^7\) own example
\(^8\) own example
(positive in that case) of the speaker more lively. The other example *Lawyers can be like sharks* represent a bad experience in a more vivid and clear way.

2.3 Further functions

Besides the hypotheses presented above, there are other functions which present the character of everyday language.

For example, metaphors are supposed to be helpful in learning and this for some reasons. First, they can be a kind of mnemonic aid. Because you have a figurative image in your mind, it is easier to remember information you have just received. Secondly, using metaphors can provide “semantic frameworks from long-term memory”\(^9\). With this, new information can be applied to these frameworks.\(^1^0\)

In social life, metaphors also can be useful. They lead to a kind of an intimate atmosphere between the speakers. This creates a link based on same or, at least, similar experiences and interests. Therefore, not everybody gets an access to the conversation between the two.\(^1^1\)

Relating to this, another function can be assumed. Sometimes, speakers want their listeners to know about their attitudes or interests. This can also be done by a “special” language, a kind of indirect expressions. Slang is such a way in which you can express your attitude by choosing your words. For example, there are several metaphorical words for *marijuana* like *grass, tea, pot, weed, dope or herb*, each representing different attitudes towards the topic. *Weed* can be used when someone thinks that smoking marijuana would not be dangerous for your health, whereas *tea* is seen as a mean to “frustrate communication”.\(^1^2\)

This way of speaking is used for showing the attitude to a certain subgroup of society, either sympathy or even membership or hostility to this group.

Slang can also be used to distance oneself from your emotions, e.g. when you do not want to show frustration about someone like your parents or teacher or something like your job.\(^1^3\)

All these functions show that metaphors are omnipresent in our ever-day communication and that they are useful in it.

---

\(^9\) Cf. Gibbs:134

\(^1^0\) Cf. Gibbs: 133,134

\(^1^1\) Cf. Gibbs: 134,135

\(^1^2\) Cf. Gibbs: 136

\(^1^3\) Cf. Gibbs: 137
3. Another metaphorical understanding

Now that some reasons for using metaphors were presented, we can return to the metaphorical understanding, respectively the definition of *metaphor*. Whereas the definition of Aristotle could be called the traditional understanding of metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson’s view made a break of theories concerning this topic. They do not just claim that metaphors are omnipresent in our ever-day-language but also that they form systems and therefor structure certain fields of life in order to be able to cope with our experience\(^{14}\). With this, they built up a new definition of metaphor: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”.\(^{15}\)

They assume that metaphors are not just part of literal language but also of common language. Besides that, metaphors are not just part of language but also of thinking and acting. Their main source is actually language because people communicate via language and communication is a conceptual system under that people think and act.\(^{16}\)

Because people have to deal with a very complex world, they use the possibility of conceptualisation to structure their experience which is normally not concrete or tangible easily. These conceptualisations go back to metaphorical processes.\(^{17}\) That means that everything which happens becomes an experience in our mind. But because experience is such an abstract concept, we try to make it more understandable by comparing it to something we know exactly and try to draw a relationship between those two concepts, the abstract and the exact one. This relationship is then metaphorical.

Lakoff and Johnson divided the metaphorical concepts into three groups\(^{18}\) which are presented in the following, starting with structural metaphors, following orientational and ontological metaphors.

---

\(^{14}\) Cf. Baldauf: 15 \\
\(^{15}\) quoted in Baldauf: 16 \\
\(^{16}\) cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 11,12 \\
\(^{17}\) Cf. Baldauf: 16 \\
\(^{18}\) ontological, orientational structural metaphors, Cf. Baldauf: 20
3.1 Structural metaphors

The group of structural metaphors is said to be the biggest group. Different parts of experiences which are complex but too abstract are conceptualised with the help of simple but known experiences, e.g. the example *discussion is war*\(^{19}\)

a) a rhetorical *fought out battle*
b) a *guerrilla warfare of words*
c) He said he does not *bang around* but thinks aloud.
d) big rhetorical *strategies*
e) to *defend* an argument 
f) the *leader of the discussion*
g) to *loose/win* the rhetorical *fight*
h) to *attack* the *opponent* with words\(^{20}\)

In this example one tries to explain the abstract concept discussion with the help of the concrete concept war and typical words which are linked to it.

Also an important feature in this group is the so-called *highlighting/hiding* phenomenon. That means that certain aspects get special attention whereas other ones are out of sight. In the example above, the feature of conflict is highlighted but co-operation which can also be a feature of war, namely at the end of a war, is hidden.\(^{21}\)

3.2 Orientational metaphors

Another group are the orientational metaphors. Those metaphors are based on the orientation in space. Therefor, a spatial relationship is made for a concept. This relationship is normally based on our experiences of the physical space we have.\(^{22}\)

Examples are: *being happy is high/being sad is down*

Lakoff and Johnson see the physical state in the fact that someone who is sad has a bowed posture and a happy person is upright.\(^{23}\) Another possibility could be seen in the fact that heaven standing for happiness is high above us but hell meaning misery is below us, so therefore down:

---

\(^{19}\) Cf. Baldauf: 23
\(^{20}\) a) to d) taken from Baldauf: 23, 218 ; e) to h) own examples
\(^{21}\) cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 23
\(^{22}\) cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 22
\(^{23}\) cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 23
a) I am in a high mood.
b) I am down.
c) to liven things up
d) I am in low spirits.24

Another example is: mind is up/emotion is down
It is explained that human beings see themselves “over” animals. So control means up and, therefor, also mind.25 But there could be another explanation. Inside the human body, the mind is in the brain, so in the head. But emotions are said to come from the stomach. The head is, known to all, above the stomach and, therefor, up:

a) The discussion went down to the emotional level, but I brought it up again to the rational level.26

There are other examples like: much/more means high
The basis for this is the assumption that adding something means growing:27

a) high rates
b) high debates
c) big money
d) rising numbers
e) falling numbers

I think, in all these examples, the orientation in space became clear.

3.3 Ontological metaphors
The last group, the ontological metaphors, are based on the experience with physical objects. Those experiences can be identified and categorised as entities restricted by a surface. So we can categorise those things that normally do not have such a boundary by using those entities. We set up artificial boundaries.28

There are many kinds of ontological metaphors with different purposes one of them being the concept abstracts are things

a) a series of questions

24 a),b) taken from Lakoff/Johnson: 23; c),d) own examples
25 cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 26
26 a) taken from Lakoff/Johnson:25
27 cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 24
28 cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 35
b) hold on to the same wish  
c) an accumulation of problems  
d) He had many dreams when he was young.  
e) The world is full of art.  
f) The solution was within reach.  
g) The joy was seen in his face.²⁹

Another concept are the container metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson, human beings are containers with boundaries and an orientation of inside and outside. This orientation is also used for other physical objects. But also non-physical objects (e.g. events, actions, activities, states) can be understood by “transforming” them into physical objects with definite boundaries.³⁰

In the case of activities that could mean:

a) The problem will be dealt with in the next discussion.  
b) You can see his feelings in his writings.  
c) She could not get out of laughing.³¹

Besides that, states and emotions are containers, too:

a) He fell in love.  
b) We will be out of the trouble soon.  
c) He fell into a depression.  
d) She fell into silence and said no more word.  
e) She entered the bureau in fear.³²

A very important group of ontological metaphors are those that describe something as a person, a personification.³³ There are innumerable examples like:

a) This theory explains everything.  
b) The facts are against it.  
c) Life betrayed me.  
d) Love speaks through her words.  
e) Their rules prohibit donations.  
f) Sleep helps if you are ill.  
g) The dream lives on.  
h) The show must go on.³⁴

²⁹ a) to c) taken from Baldauf: 21,22 ; d) to g) own examples  
³⁰ cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 39-41  
³¹ a) to c) own examples  
³² a) to c) taken from Lakoff/Johnson: 42 ; d) to e) own examples  
³³ cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 44  
³⁴ a) to c) taken from Lakoff/Johnson: 44 ; d) to h) own examples
All these metaphors use our experiences of physical objects, as containers or as persons, and help us to understand abstract phenomena like emotions, states and activities.

4. Areas of metaphors

So far, some examples of metaphors were presented. But in which areas do metaphors actually exist where they are not expected? This is shown in the following.

4.1 Metaphors in politics

One of the biggest field where metaphors are used is the field of politics. Language about politics is full of metaphorical expressions, e.g. war or sports. Since this is the topic of an individual chapter, this will be left out.

4.2 Metaphors in science

It is assumed that metaphors are not useful in the field of science. Science is supposed to be specific whereas metaphors distort meanings. So both cannot come together.

But some theorists claim that metaphor actually play a very important role in science. A key part in science is namely the concept of a theory. According to Lakoff/Johnson a theory can be seen as a building. So one can say:

a) Is that the foundation of your theory?
b) The theory is shaky.
c) We need to buttress the theory with solid arguments.
d) We have to put together the framework of the theory.
e) These facts are the bricks and mortar of my theory.

4.3 Metaphors in law

---

35 Cf. Gibbs: 140
36 Cf. Gibbs: 169-171
37 Cf. Gibbs: 173,174
Also in the field of laws, metaphors are present. An example can be found in certain laws, e.g. the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States which offers the “right of free speech”. In earlier times, this law offered a *flow of free ideas*.38

### 4.4 Metaphor in art

Art can mean many things. It includes visual media as well as paintings. In movies, there are scenes that can be understood metaphorically. Gibbs gives the example of the movie Taxi Driver. The movie shows the loneliness of human beings and their efforts to give sense to their lives by the figure of the cabby.39

Concerning paintings, Gibbs referred to the era of surrealism where familiar objects are used to “reveal hidden similarities”.40

I think, especially in this field it is very difficult to differentiate between metaphors and symbols. In addition to this, metaphors are means of language and not of pictures, moving or static ones. Art could also include books or poems. But this language is literal language and, therefore, not subject of this paper.

### 5. A concrete example: the concept of Politics in common language

In this chapter, an investigation is presented. Therefore, several articles have been examined for metaphorical expressions. These numbered articles can be found in the appendix. The examples presented are indicated as the following: the first number means the number of the article in the appendix, the second number means the line.41 Those articles were examined because newspapers represent, in the opinion of the author of this paper, the common language very well, it is not a scientific language or a poetic one.

One area where every-day using of metaphors can be examined quite well is the abstract concept of *politics*. Everybody has almost every day to deal with politics in one or the other way but at the same time it is not easy to explain what politics actually means.

---

38 Cf. Gibbs: 181,182
39 Cf. Gibbs: 184
40 Cf. Gibbs: 185,186
41 idea of indicating taken from Baldauf
Although the author of this paper was of the opinion that politics would be a perfect topic to present the metaphorical use, the material available on this specific topic showed that this is seemingly not the case. It is said that, in the field of cognitive metaphorical theory, there are just a few metaphorical concepts that define a restricted area within the concept of politics.42

One of this areas is the experience we have of games. So, one approach is the concept: politics is a game

In the centre are two or more “players” with a certain target. To reach to this target they have to take rules into account and they have to have the necessary luck to win. Examples are:

a) Politically, nothing should be at stake.
b) Even John Major seemed to be touched by the fate of his opponent.
c) Jelzin played with high stakes.43

Also in the selected articles, such examples were found:

- 1/103: These high stakes make Kremlin officials particularly sensitive…
- 3/113: …the meeting turned into a slanging match between modernizers and traditionalists.
- 4/19: His local party….won 17 out of 45 seats…
- 4/20: …besting all three…
- 4/35: …to play a key role in the formation of a new government coalition
- 4/74: He has played incessantly on distrust of Muslims

The next concept is politics is theatre

In this case, the picture in our mind is the following: there is a stage, where a production is showed by actors and the audience can nothing do but watch, e.g.

a) In many electoral districts, this play was repeated.
b) the fuss of the Tory-Revival
c) …the political stage44

This can also be seen in the own found examples:

42 Cf. Baldauf: 185
43 Cf. Baldauf: 185
44 Cf. Baldauf: 187
- 1/6: ...Putin was entertaining NATO Secretary - General George Robertson,…
- 1/51: ...that there are no heroes in Russian politics.
- 2/9: but it has been considered too conservatives,…, to take on a prominent national role.
- 3/47: Meanwhile The Flame and the Ashes marks the return to the political stage of Dominique Strauss – Kahn.
- 3/121: Henri Emmanuellie drew applause

A very obvious concept is politics is sport

The elements are “athletes” or teams, rules and competition:

   a) the contest about the White House
   b) If Bush and Clinton…would get there neck to neck.
   c) The race to the presidency.\textsuperscript{45}

There are more examples found in the selected articles:

   - 2/19: …Angela Merkel, announced she was dropping out of the race, leaving it to Stoiber to carry the conservative banner.
   - 2/44: …poll results have consistently shown him leading Merkel as the favoured candidate…
   - 2/78: …who won…the vote in a Hamburg mayoral race…
   - 2/111: and he’s entering the race when the conservatives are far stronger than only a few short months ago.
   - 3/ 4: France’s presidential race began…
   - 3/86: …that entrepreneurs and risk takers provide the motor for society
   - 3/114: …the meeting turned into a slanging match…
   - 4/14: …to a substantial victory in local elections…

A further concept is politics is trade

In this context it is about trying to reach the best advantage out of something by negotiating and making agreements. Examples are:

   a) The every-day business of government.
   b) compromises that are negotiated by politicians
   c) the deal of his boss…\textsuperscript{46}

Furthermore, there are examples in the articles, too:

\textsuperscript{45} cf. Baldauf: 189
\textsuperscript{46} Cf. Baldauf: 190
- 2/7: It is frequently called the junior sister of the opposition Christian Democratic Union
- 2/14: the CSU’s chairman
- 4/71: Fortuyn has surely profited from a sense of public frustration about the cozy consensus among established Dutch political parties.

The maybe most obvious and known concept is surely *politics is war*

*War* means an “armed conflict”\(^{47}\). It means, therefor, fight, rivals and loss or win.

There is such a variety of examples in the selected articles that these could serve as the only source for this topic:

- 1/1: Putin’s *Enemies Within*
- 1/3: …*rumblings* at home threaten to undermine his rule
- 1/17: …Russia will once again *be ruled* by a group of faceless and ruthless secret policemen
- 1/26: …, Putin is *caught up* in his first serious *power struggle*
- 1/49: …*a fight* more about *power*
- 1/69: …dismissed the *fight* as a *struggle*…
- 2/1: *Fighting* for the right
- 2/23: …Schröder looked *unbeatable*
- 2/55: …she *took over* as CDU chairwoman…
- 2/65: …to use *against* Schröder
- 2/81: …*had threatened* to field candidates nation-wide…
- 2/84: Stoiber also *takes a had line* on immigration
- 2/90: …*it could change the political climate* in Europe
- 3/3: …*lay out the battle lines* for the upcoming presidential campaign
- 3/72: …if France doesn’t abandon its *defensive* stance,…
- 3/103: …dangerous heresy
- 4/1: *Hostage* to Fortuyn
- 4/14: …*to a substantial* *victory*
- 4/29: …*their own electoral mishap*

After exploring ever-day language, in the form of articles, for metaphors for the concept *politics*, what is the result?

It is obvious that the term *politics* is not easy to explain. It mainly has to do with the government, the opposition, the relationship between the two and the relationship towards the state and the people. These elements have to “put across” with the help of words and phrases from other areas used metaphorical.

The problem is that there is no specific metaphorical vocabulary for the term *politics*. All these words and phrases presented above can also be used for other concepts. Nevertheless, metaphors are very useful to explain an abstract term like *politics* in ever-day language.

\(^{47}\)Cf. Lakoff/Johnson: 13
6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show that metaphors are not only means by literal language but that they are actually part of our every-day communication. The basis for this approach was the theory of Lakoff and Johnson who dealt with this topic in their work *Metaphors we live by*. This theory was presented and supported by a number of examples of common language, either own found examples or given ones. In addition to this, some fields where metaphors are present were shown.

Along with the functions the different areas of use and the numerous examples it should become obvious that metaphors cannot be ignored in our common language. Sometimes it is easier, maybe even better to use metaphorical expressions to explain difficult terms. Sometimes it is even impossible not using them.

All in all, one can say that metaphors are so omnipresent that we sometimes do not even recognise phrase as being metaphorical. So one can say that metaphors are not only part of our every-day language but also of our mind.
Appendix

Selected articles

Article 3: Le Quesne, Nicolas. (2002). "From Books to Ballots". *Time* 04.03., 44.
Bibliography

Books

Articles
Graff, James (2002). „Hostage to Fortuyn“. *Time* 18.03., 43
Le Quesne, Nicholas (2002). From Books to Ballots . *Time* 04.03., 44