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Definition: **metaphor** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance, for example *he is a lion in battle* Compare simile

[C16: from Latin, from Greek *metaphora*, from *metapherein* to transfer, from meta- + *pherein* to bear]

> metaphoric (,mɛtəˈfɔːrɪk) or ,metaˈphɒrɪkəl *adj*

> ,metaˈphɒrɪkəlɪ *adv*

> ,metaˈphɒrɪkəlɪnəs *n*

Summary Article: **METAPHOR**

From *Key Ideas in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*

A figure of speech in which a term that is usually associated with a certain entity is used to describe another, as in ‘the dawn of history’. In their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) affirm that metaphors are deeply ingrained in our thoughts, actions and everyday language.

See also: Ideational Theory; Linguistic Relativity; Possible World Semantics; Signs and Semiotics

Key Thinkers: Derrida, Jacques; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Whorf, Benjamin; Wittgenstein, Ludwig

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that, contrary to common belief, a metaphor is not a rhetorical device employed to embellish literary language. They argue that metaphors constitute the foundation of our conceptual system and influence our thoughts, actions and communication. In addition to their description and classification of metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson discuss their significance in both philosophy and linguistics. Zoltán Kövecses (2002) proposes a detailed framework of cognitive metaphors and their role in linguistics, literary analysis, ethics and politics. In his (2005) publication, Kövecses focuses on the diversification of metaphors as a result of cultural differences. He explores the correlations between metaphoric and cultural variations. Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon (2006) give a comprehensive account of how metaphors pervade a diverse number of disciplines, including semantics, literature, religion, cinema and music.

Criticising philosophers and linguists for their failure to appreciate the significant role metaphors play in our perception and communication, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out numerous everyday expressions that are metaphoric in nature. These expressions include such conceptual metaphors like argument as war (Lakoff and Johnson use small capitals to denote conceptual metaphors and differentiate them from metaphoric expressions). To support their hypothesis they provide a multitude of expressions associated with this and other metaphorical concepts. These include our speaking about ‘argument’ as if it were ‘war’ when we use such expressions as ‘attacking or defending a position’, ‘winning or losing an argument’, or talking about claims as being ‘indefensible’. Another conceptual metaphor is time as money, which generates a number of expressions that include ‘saving’,

‘wasting’ or ‘investing’ time.

In addition to this type, which they regard as complex and call ‘structural metaphors’ because ‘one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another’ (1980: 14), Lakoff and Johnson identify a number of simple types of metaphors, including orientational and ontological metaphors. The majority of the morphemes belonging to the former type are related to spatial orientation. They speculate that these metaphors may have resulted from our cultural and physical experience. The most commonly used of these is the up-down metaphor. In Western culture ‘up’ is associated with positive concepts like ‘happiness’ and ‘health’, whereas ‘down’ is related to negative ones such as ‘sadness’ and ‘illness’. This gives rise to such metaphoric expressions as ‘high spirits’, ‘feeling up’, ‘falling ill’ and ‘being depressed’. Ontological metaphors, on the other hand, include diverse expressions most of which refer to nonphysical entities as physical ones. Examples include the quantification of abstract entities, like speaking about someone as having ‘a lot of patience’, or describing the world as being ‘filled with intolerance’. The most prominent type of ontological metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is personification, which is giving a nonhuman entity a human quality or attribute. This is evident in expressions like talking about inflation ‘eating up’ someone’s savings, or a disease ‘catching up’ with somebody.

Another figure of speech that is metaphoric in nature is metonymy, which is employing an entity or feature to make reference to another. Examples of this include making reference to restaurant clients by the meals they order, for example ‘The chicken lasagna left a big tip’, or ‘The beef burrito spilled his drink’. A major category of metonyms, according to Lakoff and Johnson’s framework, involves using the part as a whole. This phenomenon, which has traditionally been called synecdoche, is exemplified by expressions such as ‘wheels’ to make reference to ‘cars’, or ‘fresh blood’ as a reference to ‘new people’ in a work-place setting. Lakoff and Johnson refute the claim that metonyms are purely referential in nature when compared with metaphors. They argue that the ‘part’ used to make the reference would usually have a vital role in determining the significance of the utterance.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson argue that ‘the banishment of metaphor from the realm of truth explains why metaphor has traditionally been left to rhetoric and literary analysis’ (1999: 120). Challenging this – among other – Western philosophical principles, they assert metaphors form the basis of conceptualisation. Without them, therefore, the discussion of science, morality or philosophy would not be possible. Even a universal concept like ‘time’ is metaphorically anchored because it is perceived of, and spoken about, metaphorically, not temporally. Citing examples from English, they discuss a number of expressions related to the various aspects of ‘time’. Some of these are metaphoric expressions that indicate the passage of ‘time’ as ‘approaching’, ‘arriving’, ‘running’ and ‘flying’. This metaphorisation of time, they believe, is culturally specific as reflected in different languages. In English, for instance, we ‘look forward’ to future events and regard past ones as being ‘behind us’ whereas in Aymara, a language spoken in the Chilean Andes, the future is ‘behind’. In this culture, the metaphorisation of future events as being behind indicates the unforeseeable nature of such events (1999: 141).

Lakoff and Johnson’s pioneering research on metaphor sparked interest in the field and paved the way for a multitude of subsequent publications. Reiterating the basic principles of their framework, Kövecses (2002) argues that the formula proposed to explain conceptual metaphors, which states that a target domain is understood in terms of a source domain, is insufficient. Using expressions such as ‘someone is starved for love’ or ‘hungry for affection’, he argues that the traditional explanation of

such figures of speech, which are based on the conceptual metaphor love as a nutrient, has been that the target domain 'food', a physical entity, is understood in terms of the source domain 'love', a nonphysical entity. Such a simplistic view of the relationship between the source and target domains, Kövecses argues, is not sufficient to explain the various metaphorical expressions based on the complex relationship between the two domains. He argues that the intricate mappings between 'love' and 'nutrient', and our ability to highlight different aspects of them enable us to use metaphors like 'love' as 'food', 'the desire for love' as 'hunger', and 'consequences of love' as 'effects of nourishment'. These complex mappings, Kövecses argues, enable speakers to highlight specific source-target relationships that would make it possible for them to express subtle meanings (2002: 79–92).

Since its inception as an independent, vital discipline, metaphor theory has seen a number of developments. One of these is the universality of metaphors and their variation in different cultures. Although Lakoff and Johnson (1999) alluded to this aspect of metaphors, Kövecses (2005) is credited with its development. Kövecses predicates the potential universality of many conceptual metaphors on the similarity of human physiological and conceptual experiences. Anger in humans, for instance, results in many physiological changes, including an increase in body temperature and blood pressure. Kövecses believes this accounts for diverse cultures utilising figures of speech based on the pressurised container conceptual metaphor. English metaphoric expressions like 'boiling blood', 'simmering down' and 'blowing one's top', for example, have parallels in languages as diverse as Chinese, Japanese, Hungarian, Wolof, Zulu and Polish (2005: 39). However, Kövecses adds, there are a number of variations in metaphoric expressions within the same culture and between different ones. He attributes this variation to regional, social and experiential differences.

Other developments in metaphor theory include work on metaphor and the brain, acquisition of metaphors by children, and nonverbal metaphors. Despite the inconclusiveness of the evidence, research suggests that metaphors are processed by the right hemisphere of the brain. This hypothesis is consistent with lateralisation studies that characterise the left hemisphere as being specialised in holistic types of processing that are creative and nonliteral. Knowles and Moon cite research showing that patients who had right-hemisphere aphasia found it difficult to process metaphors (2006: 62). Since figurative competence is acquired relatively late, it has been determined that children acquire metaphoric processing between the ages of ten and twelve. Finally, non-verbal metaphors in cinema, music and pictorial representation have also been areas of interest.

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