

Metaphors we live by. By GEORGE LAKOFF and MARK JOHNSON. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Pp. xiii, 241. Cloth \$13.95, paper \$5.95.

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Every linguist dreams of the day when the intricate variety of human language will be a commonplace, widely understood in our own and other cultures; when we can unlock the secrets of human thought and communication; when people will stop asking us how many languages we speak. This day has not yet arrived; but the present book brings it somewhat closer.

It is, to begin with, a very attractive book. The publishers deserve a vote of thanks for the care that is apparent in the physical layout, typography, binding, and especially the price. Such dedication to scholarly publication at prices which scholars can afford is meritorious indeed. We may hope that the commercial success of the book will stimulate them and others to similar efforts.¹

It is also a very enjoyable and intellectually stimulating book which raises, and occasionally answers, a number of important linguistic questions. It is written in a direct and accessible style; while it introduces and uses a number of new terms, for the most part it is free of jargon.² This is no doubt part of its appeal to non-linguists, though linguists should also find it useful and provocative. It even has possibilities as a textbook.

Lakoff and Johnson state their aims and claims forthrightly at the outset (p. 3):

‘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.’

¹ In the year or so since it was published, this book has sold more than 9000 copies of the hard- and soft-cover editions, and the publishers report that requests for review copies continue to arrive steadily. In a recent article in the *Village Voice* (Romano 1981), it is credited with starting a ‘publishing boom’ in books about metaphors.

² Not all the terminology used is helpful, and much of it is not systematically developed. Thus the distinction between ORIENTATIONAL and ONTOLOGICAL metaphors seems important, and is utilized in various places in the book, but it never leads to a firm categorization—indeed, it is not clear here just what types would be involved in such a categorization. The terminology is thus fairly disposable, and one needs to read carefully to distinguish terms that are merely conveniences of explication from those that embody more substantive claims.

The rest of the book consists of examples of what L&J mean, with analysis, argumentation based on the analysis, and discussion of the implications. This is an ambitious project: many readers might agree with the statements quoted above, but few would suggest that proving them is a simple matter, and some may remain unconvinced by L&J's argumentation. Their method is subtle but persuasive. As they say, one should look at language, and the language at which they look is English—specifically, their own intuitions of English collocations, selectional restrictions, idioms, and lexical semantics.³ They present numerous illustrations: this is the type of book on language that bristles with examples on almost every page. For instance, here are two sets used to illustrate the metaphors IDEAS ARE PEOPLE and IDEAS ARE PLANTS:

IDEAS ARE PEOPLE

The theory of relativity *gave birth to* an enormous number of ideas in physics. He is the *father* of modern biology. Whose *brainchild* was that? Look at what his ideas *have spawned*. Those ideas *died off* in the Middle Ages. His ideas will *live on* forever. Cognitive psychology is still in its *infancy*. That's an idea that ought to be *resurrected*. Where'd you dig *up* that idea? He *breathed new life into* that idea.

IDEAS ARE PLANTS

His ideas have finally come to *fruition*. That idea *died on the vine*. That's a *budding* theory. It will take years for that idea to *come to full flower*. He views chemistry as a mere *offshoot* of physics. Mathematics has many *branches*. The *seeds* of his great ideas were *planted* in his youth. She has a *fertile* imagination. Here's an idea that I'd like to *plant* in your mind. He has a *barren* mind.' (47; typography as in original)

These are worth examining in some detail, to see the structure of L&J's analysis. The italicized words are intended to be recognized as instantiations of the metaphor theme symbolized by the lead sentence in small caps. However, they represent many types of instantiation.

Thus *give birth to* and *father*, while usable for anthropomorphized animals, are contextually most appropriate for discussing human reproduction, and *child* and *infant* are specifically human. But *spawn* is normally restricted to non-mammalian, aquatic, vertebrate reproduction, and hence is *a* representative of a broader theme IDEAS ARE ANIMALS – or a contrary one, e.g., IDEAS ARE FISH – rather than the one to which L&J attribute it. Again, *die off* and *live on* are also not restricted to people: *die off* refers to species or populations of organisms in general (with a secondary application to populations of humans), but *live on* simply refers to extension of life of any sort.

Clearly, *living* cannot be considered an exclusive property of human beings—though an argument might be made that humans constitute our general cognitive prototype of a living animal.⁴ The last three examples in the set deal with death and resurrection; the first topic is clearly related to life in general, but the second is hardly experiential in the sense that L&J propose—it is novel or mythical metaphor. The phrase *dig up* has reference to Western burial customs, and so refers to humans; but its use connotes only a pretense of life. In contrast *resurrect* seems to mean 'bring back to (normal or super-) human life after

³ This is not to say that the interested reader will find any lexical semantics in this book, or even much that will be recognized as linguistics. L&J do not even distinguish nouns from verbs, let alone selectional restrictions from idiomatic usage—though it is clear from the examples given that they are aware of much more than they try to explicate, this book PRESUPPOSES its lexical semantics and grammatical theory.

⁴ The authors do not discuss this topic; the idea is from Paul Kay (p.c.)

death (and burial)', The difference between the two usages in the context of IDEAS is that the first one questions validity, while the second assumes it. The last example construes *life* as *breath*—an old idea which is still alive, but again not restricted to humans unless a further argument is advanced regarding their status as prototypical animals.

With regard to the second theme, the examples are better selected. The only representatives of broader classes are *fertile* and *barren*, which are freely usable with botanical or horticultural reference. *Fruit, vine, bud, flower, shoot, branch, seed, and plant* are all clear plant terms; *branch*, and to a lesser extent *shoot*, are notable because of their frequent use in what we might ordinarily call 'literal' language.

The argument which L&J make from such example sets runs as follows: first, the metaphor theme provides a source of coherence for the various collocations, which would otherwise have to be explained individually as exceptions, extensions, and highly-marked usages of the lexical units involved. This point is arrived at by examination of the sets; and despite the fact that one must sometimes sort through unnecessary complexities and downright miscues (as in *spawn* above), in the main it is easy to see the metaphor as having the function which L&J attribute to it. To this is then added the fact that these instantiations are freely generable as types, and frequently encountered as tokens. These facts, perceived through consideration of the examples and cooperative reflection on one's own usage, lead to the most common type of linguistic conclusion: if we can perceive the unifying principle, and if we can generate correctly according to it, then it must be a valid principle—a part of our competence, and therefore a valid topic for linguistic investigation. This argument schema is familiar to linguists from numerous generative works; L&J have displaced it somewhat from its conventional setting, but it is still recognizable, and still as valid as ever.

This is a brilliant and successful extension of linguistic analytic techniques into a new area.⁵ It is given an additional twist, however, by the fact that L&J bracket the entire notion of ARGUMENT (p. 4) by introducing as their first example the following metaphor:

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.

—and then discussing other models of argumentation; e.g.,

'a culture where argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and esthetically pleasing way.'

⁵ It would not be far off the mark to call this a Generative Semantics book. Aside from the fact that Lakoff was a leading figure in GS, the book bases its argumentation firmly on the generative potential of metaphor, which is clearly semantic in nature. The wealth of examples provided is also typical of GS at its height, as is the rejection of traditional limitations on linguistic analysis. The only thing obviously missing is the ironic tone that characterized much of GS; but even this can be discerned in the structural irony of using a primary figure of linguistic argumentation in a book which at least casts doubt on the validity of such arguments, There are, however, no puns.

This little rhetorical two-step demonstrates a figure utilized throughout the book: L&J make their points not just by talking about them or by giving explicit examples of them, but also by using them to structure the discussion itself; thus, by the time readers come to the end of the discussion, they have had to employ it in order to understand it. The effect is to give the book a relentlessly self-referential texture reminiscent of the verbal and figural pyrotechnics of Hofstadter 1979. Structural self-reference is, of course, as old a technique in the arts as metaphor itself; L&J might even claim that such intellectual bootstrapping is effectively equivalent to the phenomenon they identify as METAPHOR. Certainly their book blurs the boundary between science and art, like the works which Geertz 1980 calls 'blurred genres'; the work is as carefully structured and esthetically rewarding – or as controversial and irritating – as a Picasso painting. In dealing with the notoriously intractable topic of metaphor, L&J had to consider and exemplify esthetic as well as veridical problems; and they amply demonstrate that they have artistic as well as scientific goals.

There are thus several reasons to read this book: because it is fun; because it is interesting and stimulating; because it represents our field to thoughtful non-linguists; because it represents an advance in our understanding of an important facet of language; because it may be useful in our efforts to make more advances. However, one must note some things the book is NOT, lest we expect too much.

The first thing the scholar will note about this book is the lack of 'apparatus'. While this is understandable in a book targeted at a popular audience, L&J also have things to say to scholars. Chaps. 24–29 address topics in philosophy, linguistics, and the cognitive sciences generally, and in them we find well over half the book's references, many of them not cited in the bibliography—which is limited to fifteen rather idiosyncratically chosen works, in spite of L&J's explicit statement that many writers and scholars have influenced their ideas, represented as a synthesis of various intellectual traditions' (xi). When L&J mention people like Whorf, Sapir, Fillmore, Winograd, Wittgenstein, Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, and Ricoeur as intellectual forebears, and then neglect them in the bibliography, they are doing readers a disservice. It would be a significant improvement in future editions to provide an augmented bibliography.⁶ It would be a still more significant improvement to provide an index, which the book lacks. As it stands, the book must be partially memorized to be used profitably; fortunately, it's not very large.

Another absence which the scholar will note is an explicit theory of metaphor, suitable for integration with more traditional linguistic theories. L&J have a theory, to be sure; but it is implicit, and is not restricted to the sort of phenomena to which more traditional theories limit themselves. Of course, this is part of L&J's point, and represents a revolutionary approach to linguistic analysis; as with all revolutions, the outcome will not be clear until after the dust settles. However, L&J's approach is developed in the context of a large-scale analysis, thus presenting more product than advertising. Still, one gets the impression from the book that it takes a stance apart from linguistic, or even general scholarly, tradition.

A linguist will also recognize a number of topics that could have been further explicated along fairly straightforward and non-controversial lines. Thus, although selectional restrictions have different statuses in various theories, they can very easily be exemplified and learned as a linguistic phenomenon; but L&J do not intend to teach their readers linguistic categories and terminology. It would not be difficult to annotate most of their analyses in linguistic terms, though this would result in a much larger book. Of course, a teacher can supply annotations and thereby utilize it as a text.

⁶ At a minimum, readers should be directed to Shibbes 1971, an annotated bibliography that is obviously a labor of love, if not of a lifetime. Among more recent sources, Sacks 1979 and Ortony 1979 contain many works besides those by Reddy (in Ortony) and Davidson (in Sacks), which L&J list; e.g., Searle (in Ortony) is important and influential. Finally, whether or not L&J attribute ideas to one or another scholar in the text of the book, representative works of the thinkers acknowledged as sources should be listed as references. (A recent development relevant to this issue is the excellent and very comprehensive bibliography found in Johnson 1982.)

I field-tested the book as a principal text in a humanities seminar for entering university freshmen; the goal of the course was not primarily to learn linguistic analysis, but rather to learn and apply the type of analysis which L&J use. The results, though not unmixed, were largely positive. All the students enjoyed the book, and all quickly caught on to the trick of recognizing metaphoric usage and identifying the metaphor theme. However, they discovered that the technique leads nowhere without some fairly sophisticated knowledge of language structure and use, which most of them lacked. In addition, they found L&J's terminology confusing, in that it was not sufficiently taxonomized and not used in completely consistent ways. This is a problem recognized in the book; e.g., in discussing the role of experience in structuring our metaphoric system, L&J apologize for the lack of accurate descriptive terminology and representational conventions:

'We are adopting this practice out of ignorance, not out of principle. IN ACTUALITY WE FEEL THAT NO METAPHOR CAN EVER BE COMPREHENDED OR EVEN ADEQUATELY REPRESENTED INDEPENDENTLY OF ITS EXPERIENTIAL BASIS.'
(19; emphasis in original)

However, my students' most common reactions to the book were that it gave them a valuable experience of learning; that it opened their perceptions to a novel way of understanding language, thought, and behavior; and that it made a difference in their education. I hope that its potential impact on our students, and on interested readers in general, will be utilized widely in linguistic education.'

From the viewpoint of a metaphor researcher, this book is clearly a milestone, but it does not point in any particular direction for further research—rather, it points in many directions. One obvious suggestion is that other languages than English should be treated along the lines which L&J lay down. Another obvious extension of their ideas is a linkage between metaphoric structures and cognitive/sensory structures, like visual perception and narrative memory strategies.

The basic problems of the cognitive sciences have to do with REPRESENTATION and PROCESS, and this book begs the question of semantic and metaphoric representation. Clearly, a very explicit semantics is necessary on the lexical level in order to formalize the generalizations captured here; and it must deal satisfyingly with the concept of LITERAL MEANING, which is curiously absent as a topic here—although earlier drafts (circulated informally) treated the matter explicitly, denying the validity of any concept of literal meaning. In the present book, L&J take no position on the question, though much of what they say is consistent with a denial of the concept. The problem seems to be that the ability to recognize a construction or fixed form as a metaphoric instantiation, which L&J demonstrate to be real, depends on the ability to recognize some kind of 'primary frame reference'—as when we attribute *buy*, *sell*, and *spend* to commercial transaction contexts, and view the *spend* of *spend time* as metaphoric. Thus, while L&J can and do challenge many traditional examples of literal meaning, they cannot afford to challenge the concept itself, since their empirical basis depends on it in some sense. When that sense is better explicated, the problem may clear up; until then, it will be vexing. The representation problem thus awaits advances in clarity and specificity in lexical semantics—perhaps along the lines suggested by Kittay & Lehrer 1981, who propose a field analysis of metaphoric usage, or by Wierzbicka 1981, whose primitive-elements analysis is adaptable to many problems of representation.

The process problem, however, is not dealt with at all by L&J, except to demonstrate that some form of process is involved. They give it various names, but offer no account of How we humans manage to go about 'UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCING ONE KIND OF THING IN TERMS OF ANOTHER', which they claim (5; emphasis in original) is 'THE ESSENCE OF METAPHOR.' This must wait on clarification of the representation problem in lexical semantics before any empirical cognitive solutions can be seriously proposed.

⁷ For example, the first ten chapters comprise a self-contained explication of many of L&J's points that can be copied for class reading in less than 25 pages.

It is impossible to evaluate this book fairly by any conventional standards, because it so carefully avoids categorization. Part of its aim is to question, if not to challenge directly, the validity and value of conventional approaches to research in linguistics and philosophy. In doing this, L&J have had much success: commercial, artistic, intellectual—even political, if one accounts theoretical argumentation as partially a matter of academic politics. They have had their failures, too; but I don't know whether my perceptions of their failures (e.g. in specification of semantics) result from my own heightened and unmet expectations, or whether they represent goals which L&J set and failed to meet. Certainly the book has flaws, as well as quite a bit of sloppiness; it was obviously written in a short time. Perhaps we can fairly lay the blame for any disappointment on L&J's shoulders; ironically, they deliver so many things so well that it is easy for us to expect them to do everything we would like.

It would be easy to go on for pages discussing ideas which this book contains or doesn't contain, or ideas it suggests; but as L&J demonstrate on every page, the most important fact about metaphor is that it is experienced—and this book demands not so much to be read as to be experienced. The ideas that well up during the experience represent as much of the reader's conceptual structure as of the authors'. This trait, common to all human communication, is intensified in this book by Lakoff & Johnson's artistic vision, resulting in a powerfully human book about a powerful human topic; and that, perhaps, is enough.

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[Received 11 March 1982.]