

Discuss and illustrate
the view that
metaphors influence
thought and action



Metaphors are omnipresent in language, the title of this essay, for example, contains a metaphor, but for the sake of accuracy, let us define exactly what a metaphor is. According to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, metaphor is “ a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them”. In other words, metaphor is a linguistic tool used in order to describe an object or concept by using an alternative and often very different word.

For example, the title of this essay asks that the author, “ illustrate the view”, the author is not expected to draw a picture, but instead must expound and explain “ the view”. Linguists, meanwhile, find that metaphors not only act as a stumbling block in theories of meaning, they also frequently underlie the historical processes of meaning change. As stated above, metaphor is a tool. However, it is an everyday tool in constant use. What is remarkable is the ease with which we make unconscious and automatic use of metaphor. It is also not in anyway limited to poets or abstract thinkers, as Lackoff and Turner state in their book, “ More than Cool Reason”, metaphor, “ is accessible to everyone: as children, we automatically, as a matter of course, acquire a mastery of everyday metaphor.

” Lackoff and Turner go on to say metaphor is conventional, in that it is an essential part of normal thought and language. Thirdly, they claim, metaphor helps “ us to understand ourselves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can” and that metaphor is “ indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason. Read also about theThat is to say,

without metaphor as part of our language, we would not cogitate or rationalise in the same manner as we do without it.

The use of metaphor occurs in every corner of life and society where language is present. In economics, we talk about inflation, when discussing the environment, the greenhouse effect could come up and in sport we can talk about a player being out. One of the characteristics that metaphor shares with language is that we all understand metaphors, just as we understand language. There may be cases where individuals do not see the connection between, but generally, if someone were to construct a metaphor, its meaning could be easily, and unconsciously, be determined by someone else.

To further discuss this topic we must identify the particular view that metaphors influence thought and action. According to "A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics", by David Crystal, Cognitive Metaphor is the theory that "metaphor is viewed as performing an essential role in human language and cognition, encoding world views in all forms of linguistic activity, including everyday conversation. Higher-level concepts as causality, time and the emotions are seen to be semantically grounded in lower-level domains of physical experience...".

Although we have already discussed the first part of the definition, the second part needs to be explained. The "higher-level" concepts are expressed, so they can be better understood, in terms of "lower-level" concepts. An example is, "life is a journey". Through this metaphor we can

understand all that it is to live by simply thinking in terms of our experiences on a journey.

Of course, in order to comprehend metaphor it is essential to understand the non-literal nature of it. According to the Experiential Hypothesis “ most abstract concepts arise from ... preconceptual physical experiences by metaphorical projection”.

For example, we relate the increasing of something with going “ up” because of our bodily experience of up and down. Andrew Goatly, in his book, “ The Language of Metaphors” divides metaphors into two groups “ Active” and “ Inactive”. Active metaphors are metaphors that are recognised as such, while inactive ones are less likely to be thought of as metaphors. The most “ inactive” metaphors are known as “ dead” metaphors.

That is to say that the metaphor has transformed from being a metaphor, to becoming a synonym for the concept the metaphor used to “ describe”.

Goatly confidently states that “ undoubtedly our cognitive structure is determined by conventional metaphors”. His evidence for this is to be found in the lexicon, or the vocabulary of English. According to the Goatly, most abstract vocabulary in English is derived from conceptual metaphors.

This is probably because we feel the need to ground abstract concepts in terms we equate with the physical words, where we have solid points of reference. An example is “ cutting the budget deficit in half”. Since you can not physically take a pair of scissors to the budget, cutting is a metaphor for the act of reducing the deficit. By using the word “ cut” we visualise the reduction in the size of the budget deficit. In addition, by using the word “
<https://assignbuster.com/discuss-and-illustrate-the-view-that-metaphors-influence-thought-and-action/>

cut” rather than “ reduce” we are adding a dramatic dimension and finality to the action. In other words we reify an abstraction.

Once this has been done, the “ former” abstractions are as “ real” as concrete objects. They are thus bestowed with the features of objects. They can be created, e. g.

, make an excuse; destroyed, e. g. , demolished the theory; transformed, e. g.

, his hopes faded away. These are but a few examples, these abstract entities can similarly be transferred, handled or possessed, can have dimension and shape, and be perceived. It is in this way that Goethe perceives that patterns of inactive metaphors are formed, made up of lexical sets. In addition to being made concrete, metaphors can bestow “ life” upon a concept.

The “ life of a government” brings to mind the stages of a human life, birth, adolescence, death etc. and superimposes them upon the temporal existence of a government. In this way we are given a reference from which to analyse and discuss the government. For instance, political analysts can discuss how a government “ matured” over the course of its “ life”. As has been hinted at before, the specific metaphor used to describe a concept will shape how we view that concept.

For instance, if a person is described as being “ sly as a fox”, that means he is very sly. This is a natural conclusion because fox are considered sly, and successfully so, whether it is attacking protected poultry, or escaping

hounds. However, the same word, can have different meanings, even in metaphors. If a female is described as being a “ fox”, it suggests a great beauty accompanied by an elegant demeanour and a certain aloofness. This is similar to the attitude of the fox. However, even the meanings of metaphors can change, and the label “ she is a fox” is now often attributed simply to a beautiful female.

The fact that the same abstract concept can be metaphorically structured in different ways suggests that the choice of metaphor can have far reaching ideological and cognitive consequences. For instance, “ he is a red” and “ he is a comrade”. Although they can have the same meaning, i. e. , the man in question is a communist, they have very different connotations.

This is an example of how metaphor can influence thought. We have previously been discussing how metaphors “ work” and how they allow us to view abstract concepts in terms of the physical world. Not only does this allow us to more easily understand these abstract concepts, it is the only way for us to learn them. With out a frame of reference it is impossible to understand abstract concepts.

It is necessary to put them into words that we are familiar with, and understand otherwise comprehension is impossible. An example can be found in science fiction. In the Star Trek episode “ Darmok”, two species find it impossible to communicate. The reason is one of the species language’s is based entirely on the folklore of the culture and metaphors. So for instance the phrase “ Darmok and Jelad at Tenagra” refers to two heroes who travelled separately to a distant island, defeated a mighty beast, and left

together. Someone with no knowledge of this story would be unable to decipher the meaning and so would be unable to understand the language.

According to Michael Reddy, metaphors are fundamental to human language and conceptualising. Reddy's claims that human communication is overwhelmingly understood in terms of a speaker or writer transmitting the meaning of concepts, through the use of words, to a listener or reader who, in turn, "unpacks" the words to obtain the meaning of the concept. The principle, which he calls the "conduit metaphor" is deep-rooted in nature. An illustration of this is the abundance of examples of the type: "It's very difficult to put this concept into words" and "His letter brought the idea to the French pilots." In conclusion, according to the view that metaphors influence thought and action, we see the world around us in terms of concepts we are familiar with and quantify.

When we then discuss a new or unfamiliar concept, we bring our knowledge in as a reference with which to compare, and then quantify and define the new concept. In addition, the followers of Lackoff believe that metaphor is not just a way of structuring human experience of the world, but also a pertinent aspect of the act of communication itself. This belief, combined with the theory that language does not just replicate thought mean that it is important that any "metaphoric regularities in conceptions of human communication be investigated."