

## 'Metaphor'

from Sanford Schane, Language and the Law, Chapter 2, pp. 72-79.

### **Metaphor in Thought and Language**

One may be inclined to think of metaphor as belonging exclusively to the language of poetry and imagination, to rhetorical flourish and figures of speech, but certainly not to the stuffy, objective, verbose prose so often associated with legal discourse. However, research in cognitive linguistics over the past twenty years has shown this commonplace idea of metaphor to be untenable. The cognitive research has revealed that metaphor is not the sole province of literary language, but rather its images permeate everyday speech and it is a major component of conceptual thinking. Lakoff and Johnson, pioneers in this area, have expressed eloquently this novel view: '[Metaphors] are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.'

<sup>i</sup> Metaphorical conceptualization extends into all areas of discourse - from the humanities through the sciences. For example, a traditional scientific view of the atom posits a nucleus of protons and neutrons that is surrounded by one or more rings of orbiting electrons. The structure of the atom has been compared to a miniature 'solar system', where the nucleus of the atom corresponds to the sun, and the revolving electrons to orbiting planets. We can state the essence of this imaginative correspondence as a conceptual metaphor: AN ATOM IS A MINIATURE SOLAR SYSTEM. (We follow standard practice of using exclusively capital letters for stating conceptual metaphors.) Advocates of superstring theory claim that the ultimate constituents of matter are nothing other than submicroscopic one-dimensional vibrating strings. A new metaphor has evolved:

With the discovery of superstring theory, musical metaphors take on a startling reality, for the theory suggests that the microscopic landscape is

suffused with tiny strings whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos.... What appear to be different elementary particles are actually different 'notes' on a fundamental string. The universe - being composed of an enormous number of these vibrating strings - is akin to a cosmic symphony. <sup>ii</sup>

What is the purpose of these various metaphors? They provide a way of understanding an unfamiliar concept - such as the structure and motion of an 'invisible' atom within the older theory or the behavior of atomic subconstituents according to the newer theory - in terms of more familiar conceptions: the sun with its revolving planets and vibrating musical strings. As Lakoff and Johnson remark: 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.' <sup>iii</sup> A conceptual metaphor not only enables one mentally to structure experience across two different domains, but it often is the source for the vocabulary that one uses in talking about the experience. Hence, the term 'metaphor' applies both to thought and to language. Whenever it is important to differentiate between the two types, we will refer to 'thought' metaphors as conceptual and to 'language' ones as linguistic.

Because the reader is likely already to be familiar with literary metaphors, this genre provides a useful entry to the general topic of metaphor, and in particular, to the important distinction between conceptual and linguistic metaphors. We begin by examining two different types of literary metaphors. One of them strictly belongs to the realm of poetry, while the other one resembles the kinds of metaphors that are part of everyday usage. We then look at some additional metaphors from ordinary language. With this preparation in tow we will be ready to consider the conceptual metaphors that underlie the legal fictions of the attractive nuisance and of the corporation as a person.

## **The Conceptual Metaphor: LIFE IS THEATRE**

Webster's Dictionary defines metaphor as: 'A figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, different thing by being spoken of as if it were that other.'<sup>iv</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary's definition is similar: '[A] figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable.'<sup>v</sup> According to these definitions, metaphor is a property of language - 'a figure of speech'. As an example, let us look at the following celebrated lines from Shakespeare's play, As You Like It.<sup>vi</sup>

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

Shakespeare depicts the human condition as a theatre performance - perhaps a not unexpected metaphor from a playwright. The world is a stage and we are mere actors. We make our exits and our entrances as the various events of our lives unfold, and there are many roles to be played in a lifetime - exemplifying our various personalities or identities, such as student, parent, worker. Each major period of life comprises an act in this evolving drama - from infancy, when the babe is 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', through youth, then adulthood, and right up to senility, when one is 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'.

These five lines from Shakespeare, taken together, comprise one grand conceptual metaphor: LIFE IS THEATRE. Each line, in turn, contains its own 'figure of speech', a linguistic metaphor that reinforces this major theme. The conceptual metaphor is not something that anyone - whether a playwright or a person on the street - actually says; it is

the linguistic metaphors that encompass what is actually heard. Rather, the conceptual metaphor functions as a representation - a succinct description, of the structural relationship between an abstract notion, such as 'life', and a more concrete one, such as 'theatre'. A conceptual metaphor generally has a structure represented as: X IS Y, where X stands for the more abstract concept and Y for the lesser one. We shall view this structuring as a mapping of the terms from the Y domain back onto the corresponding elements of the X domain - from source to target. This mapping for the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS THEATRE is shown in Figure 2.1, where THEATRE functions as the source and LIFE as the target, and the arrows indicate the direction of the mapping.

LIFE IS THEATRE: A conceptual metaphor	
Source (Y): THEATRE	Target (X): LIFE
the stage =>	the world
the players =>	men and women
the exits and entrances =>	the events of one's life
the parts (roles) played =>	various personality types
the acts of a play =>	the periods during one's lifetime

Figure 2.1

The genesis of this metaphor resides in a natural link between theatre and life: Theatre imitates life. Theatre has always been an effective medium for portraying the human condition, and dynamic playwrights are masters at bringing to the stage a 'slice of life'. If powerful theatre is a reflection of life, it is not surprising that one way of comprehending the complexity of life would be to imagine it, in turn, unfolding as though it were a theatre production. Then life comes to imitate theatre.

## The Conceptual Metaphor: A TREE IS A PERSON

In the lines cited from As You Like It, Shakespeare explicitly mentioned the source and the target for three of his correspondences - i.e. stage => world; players => men and women; acts => ages. The remaining two were left implicit, but from their sources - i.e. exits/entrances and parts, one is able to deduce the sorts of entities that ought to be the targets, as I have suggested in Table 2.1. It is more the exception than the rule for a poet to provide an explicit indication of the connections between domains. In fact, much of the charm of poetry comes from discovering the associations. As an example, let us look at the poem, Trees, by Joyce Kilmer.

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree;

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,  
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

Although our main concern is to explicate the nature of metaphor, it is of course not the only ingredient of a poem. Every poem has both form and content, an outer structure and an inner meaning, and metaphor is only one of the devices for expressing meaning. Often both form and content interact to reinforce the theme of a poem. Such is the case here. It is worthwhile then to look at these two elements of Kilmer's poem.

Let us begin with the form. Rhythm and rhyme stand out as its most obvious features. Looking at the rhythmic or metrical structure of this short, but pithy, poem, we note that it is composed of twelve lines that are divided into six rhyming couplets. Each couplet is self-contained; it expresses a unique idea. The independence of the couplets is further strengthened and formally expressed by the spaces separating them. Furthermore, each line of the poem contains exactly eight syllables, and except for the second from the last line, the syllables are grouped into four iambic feet. An iambic foot comprises an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. (See Figure 2.2 for a metrical analysis of the poem: Acute marks over vowels denote accented syllables, vertical strokes separate feet, and hyphens divide words into syllables.) The exceptional second from the last line begins with a trochaic foot - that is, an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one, but then the final line reverts to the normal iambic rhythm. Why has the poet created one deviant line? We turn to the content of the poem for a possible explanation.

I thínk| that Í| shall név-|er sée  
 A pó-|em lóve-|ly ás| a trée

A trée| whose hún-|gry móuth| is prést  
 A-gáinst| the eárh's| sweet flów-|ing bréast;

A trée| that lóoks| at Gód| all dáy,  
 And lífts| her léaf-|y árms| to práy;

A trée| that máy| in súm-|mer wéar  
 A nést| of rób-|ins ín| her háir;

Up-ón| whose bós-|om snów| has láin;  
 Who ín|ti-máte-|ly líves| with ráin.

Pó-ems| are máde| by fóols| like mé,  
 But ón-|ly Gód| can máke| a trée.

Figure 2.2

The poem starts and ends on a similar theme. It begins by informing us that even the most splendid poem pales next to the gracefulness of a tree. The conclusion to the poem

presents a striking variant on this same theme. Whereas the opening couplet draws a contrast between the beauty of a poem and that of a tree, the closing couplet focuses on the creators of those products. The poet asserts that artists' creations can never be as magnificent as the Deity's handiwork. An interplay of metrics and grammar further contributes to the contrast. The final stanza begins with the word 'poems' and ends with the word 'tree'. Linguistically, the beginnings and ends of sentences often function as sites for emphasis. Moreover, the placing of these two key words in positions of prominence has introduced metrical tension. Because the two-syllable word 'poems' has main accent on its first syllable, its position at the start of a line causes it to begin in an unexpected manner. As already noted, this is the only line of the poem having an inverted or trochaic foot. Now we know why.

The positioning of the two critical elements, 'poems' and 'tree', also produces a striking grammatical effect, one having to do with syntactic prominence. The word 'poems' functions grammatically as the subject of a passive construction - i.e. 'Poems are made by fools like me', whereas the contrasting word 'tree' functions as the direct object of an active utterance - i.e. 'But only God can make a tree'. Now passive sentences are generally judged less dynamic than active ones. In fact, the very terms 'active' and 'passive' suggest this distinction. Thus, the syntactic structure of the couplet, along with the previously observed metrical effect, contributes to the idea that what is created by a poet is inferior to what God can do.

The opening and closing couplets make use of literal language. There are no metaphors here. It is in the four couplets sandwiched between the opening and the closing stanzas that metaphor blossoms. By means of personification, the poet describes the ways that a tree is so special. It has some of the physical characteristics of a person. Figure 2.3 shows the mapping of attributes from the source domain PERSON to the target domain TREE for the conceptual metaphor: A TREE IS A PERSON.

A TREE IS A PERSON	
Source: PERSON	Target: TREE
Body parts	Tree structures
mouth =>	roots
arms =>	branches
hair =>	leaves
bosom =>	trunk

Figure 2.3

The human body is an ideal source domain if only because we are so familiar with it. In the poem the similarities between the anatomy of a person and the physical structures of a tree are quite obvious, even though the poet never makes explicit mention of ‘roots’, ‘branches’, ‘leaves’, or ‘trunk’. Yet the reader has no difficulty in ascertaining the intended targets. The associations are apparent because of the way that Kilmer has juxtaposed human anatomical structures to specific properties and events relating to trees: A mouth pressed against the nourishing earth; arms that are leafy; hair harboring a nest of robins; a bosom overlain with snow. The personification extends even to stature and movement. Both a tree and a person occupy upright postures. Because of this vertical orientation, the poet has imputed humanlike behavior to the tree: looking up towards the heavens; lifting appendages to pray; wearing a head covering. The tree herself is womanly: She has a bosom; she lifts her arms in prayer and wears a nest in her hair. The personification of woman extends even further - to the image of ‘mother earth’, through whose metaphorical breast flows life-giving sustenance.

Kilmer's poem illustrates how metaphor enables us to acquire familiarity with one set of concepts in terms of another. We know all too well what it means to look and to act and to feel human, but we have less immediate knowledge of what it means to be a tree. By endowing the tree with personal features, the poet invites us to relate to it more intimately and suggests that we envision it as never seen before.

### **Conventional Metaphors**

For a long time the idea had existed that metaphors belong exclusively to poetry and other literary language or else to rhetorical and persuasive speech. In fact, the phrase, 'figure of speech', which appears in dictionary definitions of 'metaphor', seems to strengthen this assumption. However, a significant body of research within the field of cognitive linguistics has persuasively demonstrated that in ordinary discourse speakers regularly use linguistic metaphors, and those expressions reveal the conceptual metaphors of the underlying thought processes. A conventional metaphor is one that has found its way into normal, everyday language. It just so happens that the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS THEATRE, has become conventionalized in this way. Note the following examples.

Someone who is not sincere is often described as 'putting on an act'.

Such an individual may even be facetiously referred to as 'a good actor'.

A person that has made a significant accomplishment may rightly 'take a bow'.

A job well done becomes 'a hard act to follow.

One wonders whether rock stars are appropriate 'role models' for young people.

One day each one of us will have to make that 'final curtain call'.

These linguistic expressions, part of ordinary discourse, demonstrate that the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS THEATRE, is one of the ways that English speakers conceive of and talk

about life. I suspect that this conventional metaphor existed as well in Shakespeare's day. Playwrights and poets are quite skillful at taking a conventional metaphor and rendering it in completely unconventional ways. The lines from As You Like It are so memorable because of Shakespeare's knack at creating novel linguistic expressions for this existing conceptual metaphor. For instance, 'all the world is a stage', was not in Shakespeare's time, nor is it for us, an ordinary language realization of the conceptual metaphor. Hence, a conceptual metaphor, such as LIFE IS THEATRE, may have as its realizations both conventional linguistic metaphors, such as 'a hard act to follow', and unconventional ones, such as 'all the world is a stage'.

The conceptual metaphor, A TREE IS A PERSON, is not a conventional one and therefore it has solely unconventional linguistic metaphors as its realizations. It is not part of our usual experience to conceive of trees and to talk about them as though they are human. However, precisely by employing this unconventional metaphor, Kilmer presented us with an unforgettable image of what a tree could be. It is the uniqueness of this conceptual metaphor that makes this poem so unusual.

Some target concepts may be sufficiently abstract so that more than one conventional metaphor exists for characterizing them. The conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS THEATRE, is not the only way of talking about the complexities of living. Another powerful conventional metaphor for getting a hold on life is: LIFE IS A JOURNEY, where JOURNEY becomes the source and LIFE again is the target. The following examples have been adapted from Kövecses. <sup>vii</sup>

He seems lost, and his life has no direction.

I've reached a crossroads in my career, but I'm not sure which way to turn.

She's clever and will go far in life.

I've finally arrived at where I want to be in my work.

He knows where he's headed and will never let anyone get in his way.

She's gone through a lot in her marriage.

A good education will give one a head start in a career.

How did the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, evolve? Kövecses does not assume a direct correlation between life and journeys.<sup>viii</sup> Rather, he sees this metaphor as a special instance of a more basic one: PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS. Attaining a goal or purpose is synonymous with reaching a destination. One can also imagine life as a series of goals. And the reason for taking a trip or journey is to arrive at a destination. The result of all of this is a complex conceptual equation composed of sources and their targets -  
DESTINATION : JOURNEY => PURPOSE : LIFE.

Let us look at one more conceptual metaphor for understanding life: LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME. This time GAMBLING functions as the source. Here are some examples adapted from Lakoff and Johnson.<sup>ix</sup>

Even though the odds are against me, I'll still take my chances.

If you play your cards right, you can do it.

It's not a toss-up. Unfortunately, he holds all the aces.

Don't believe a word she says; she's just bluffing.

He won big, but he's still a loser.

I think we should stand pat and wait to see what happens next.

Sometimes you have to take a chance in life. The stakes are too high not to.

What can I do? That's just the luck of the draw.

Without question, these expressions are drawn from the world of gaming. Nonetheless, as the examples illustrate, they constitute normal ways of talking about life, and not about gambling. Lakoff and Johnson make the point that this is literal language with metaphorical structuring. It is literal because anyone using these expressions would not be considered engaging in metaphor, simply because this is one of the natural ways of talking about life. Yet the fact that speakers are able to portray life as a gambling game makes this particular kind of talk metaphorically structured.

We have examined the conventional metaphors - LIFE IS THEATRE, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME - all three of which have LIFE, an abstract concept as the target and various concrete notions as sources for comparison. These three are not the only ones for representing 'life', but they illustrate that a single source domain may not always suffice for portraying a complex concept and additional concrete sources may come to the fore in order to depict other facets of a rich abstract domain. This unidirectionality - from concrete to abstract - is typical of the metaphorical process. It would be rare indeed for a more abstract concept to function as a source.

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<sup>i</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors we Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1980:159).

<sup>ii</sup> Brian Greene, The Elegant Universe, New York: Random House (1999:135,146).

<sup>iii</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 5.

<sup>iv</sup> Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), New York: Dorset & Baber (1964:1132).

<sup>v</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 384

<sup>vi</sup> William Shakespeare, As You Like It, Act II, Scene VII.

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<sup>vii</sup> Zoltán Kövecses, Metaphor: A Practical Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press  
(2002:3).

<sup>viii</sup> Kövecses, 70-71.

<sup>ix</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 51.