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## THE DEATH OF METAPHOR

In their first book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson put forward the view that conventional metaphors – or *dead* metaphors, as they are commonly called in English – are very much alive. The very title of the book carried the suggestion that our daily existence is structured metaphorically: that the worn-out phrases we commonly use are symptoms of a vast system of unconscious metaphorical thought which underlies language, action and understanding. This perspective on language – borrowed from AI research – has been developed in a series of publications and has become influential. I argued against this position in a longer work (Pawelec 2005).

In this place, I would like to show in more detail the problems inherent in Lakoff's approach to the life and death of metaphor. This venture is not meant merely as an exercise in criticism of some limitations of the theory of conceptual metaphor. My aim is to question the boast that this theory is a significant improvement on traditional study of meaning and much closer to "what people find *meaningful* in their lives" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: ix). I share, though, the assumption accepted by Lakoff and Johnson that the theory of metaphor is central for any adequate theory of meaning, as metaphor is "the omnipresent principle of language" (Richards 1965: 92).

Let us start with the limitations, however. In order to see them better, we should have some grasp of the basic notions. When is a metaphor alive? To quote Samuel Johnson, when "it gives you two ideas for one" (cf. Richards 1965: 93). One could say that we are aware of a metaphoric use of a word if its conventional meaning ('the vehicle' in Richards' terminology) does not fit the object described ('the tenor'). To give an example:

Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men, who instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen, and by their goings and comings stitch towns together in parts where else they would be ripped (Thoreau 1961: 189)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this example to Perrin 1987. I used it repeatedly while discussing related issues in other texts, cf. Pawelec 2005: 58; Pawelec 2006: 22.

In this passage, the anglers cannot literally ‘stitch’ the towns (‘the vehicle’). Literally, they leave footprints in the snow which may look like ‘stitches’ from bird’s eye view. On a more abstract level, they move continually from their own towns to the pond and back again, thus forming an imaginary network linking – or ‘stitching’ – the towns (‘the tenor’). One should remember that in Richards’ ‘interactive theory’ of metaphor the intended meaning is different from the tenor – it is a product of viewing the tenor from the vantage point provided by the vehicle. We will return to this idea shortly.

A ‘dead’ metaphor is a lexical item with a conventional meaning different from its original meaning (or some previous meaning in the chain of semantic change). Therefore, there is no need to consult the original meaning in order to understand a dead metaphor. Occasionally, a conventional metaphor may become ‘delexicalised’ (Dobrzyńska 1994: 77) – the more original sense may become evident (as with puns – intended or unintended). To conclude, a dead metaphor is the product of a semantic shift in the history of a language. This process – perhaps like all social processes – is gradual (see Nöth 1995: 131 for successive stages of the ‘dying’ of metaphor). It is also reversible for special uses in discourse – a dead metaphor can be ‘revitalised’.

This picture is frontally attacked by Lakoff: “The term *dead metaphor* is a holdover from a traditional folk theory of language that has turned out not to be workable. [...] As that theory dissolves under the scrutiny of empirical research, the meaning of «dead metaphor» cannot remain constant. What were called dead metaphors in the old theory have turned out to be a host of quite disparate phenomena, including those metaphors that are most alive – the ones that we use constantly in everyday thought” (Lakoff 1987: 143). Lakoff’s criticism of the standard use of the term ‘dead metaphor’ is based on the idea that linguistic forms are epiphenomena of the Cognitive Unconscious. In other words, metaphors or ‘semantic transfers’ are primarily mental programs performed by our unconscious; words are merely symptoms of these prior and independent mental processes. Incidentally, it is hard to understand why Lakoff thinks that this vision is ‘empirical’, if the hypothetical semantic transfers are not only unconscious by definition, but also remain unconnected to the material (hence, potentially observable) substratum. The intractable gap between physiology of the brain and semantics, which has tormented philosophers for centuries, is never mentioned as a problem – let alone discussed – by Lakoff.

The idea that the term ‘dead metaphor’ covers ‘a host of quite disparate phenomena’ makes sense only in the context of Lakoff’s theory (if at all). We will not go into details here (see my discussion in Pawelec 2005: 44–47). It is enough to notice that the criterion of metaphorical vitality is located on the deep level of the Cognitive Unconscious. Specifically, ‘most alive’ are those surface structures which can be linked to the most productive programs of semantic transfer. For instance, to those described as ‘structural metaphors’, e.g. ARGUMENT IS WAR. Lakoff talks in this context about ‘systematic mappings’, which he opposes to ‘one-shot mappings’ (as exemplified by poetic or unusual metaphors).

This approach leads to some uncomfortable consequences. If ‘metaphor’ is redefined as a ‘mental mapping’, then the verbal, conventional level (‘the lit-

eral') is no longer criterial for metaphoricity. Lakoff is thus forced to redefine the literal: he postulates a rather extensive primary conceptual level which emerges spontaneously when people act in some environment; the rest of their conceptual system is supposed to result from semantic transfers. This idea is empirically untenable in the light of Vygotsky's and Piaget's findings (e.g. Vygotsky 1962; Piaget 1971; cf. Pawelec 2005: 173–181). Both researchers showed conclusively, I believe, that concepts do not arise spontaneously, but rather in a long process of symbolic social interaction.

In our context, it is enough to point out that notions which 'people find *meaningful* in their lives': 'the literal', 'the metaphorical', 'live metaphor', 'dead metaphor', are not only fundamentally redefined by Lakoff, but also made much *less meaningful*. Since they are theoretical constructs defined relative to a hypothetical mental level, they have no relevance in everyday life. It would even be difficult to find uncontested specimens of these concepts (this is certainly the case with 'dead conceptual metaphor'). From this perspective, Lakoff's final statement in his article on the death of metaphor could not be further from reality: "it is important to be aware of the theory-dependent status of traditional terms such as *literal* and *dead metaphor*. They carry old and demonstrably false theories with them, and, if not carefully used, they will presuppose those old theories and stifle discussion of contemporary research" (Lakoff 1987: 147). It is not true that traditional terms are 'theory-dependent'. These terms, as used colloquially, simply point out pragmatically relevant phenomena. Dissecting all non-truths from this passage would take us, however, too far afield.

I would like to give more attention to another consequence of Lakoff's theory, which has a direct bearing on the status of metaphor in our lives. If we live by 'systematic mappings' (instantiated by conventional metaphors), then 'one-shot mappings' (instantiated by novel or poetic metaphors) are – presumably – less important, idiosyncratic. On the theoretical plane, the relationship between these conceptual levels is never explained. Do 'systematic mappings' arise at one stroke in our minds? Or rather gradually, by accumulation of related one-shot mappings? Lakoff often talks about one domain giving structure to another domain, but 'domains' are theoretical constructs used in AI or Cognitive Semantics. It seems, for instance, that the label ARGUMENT IS WAR covers a whole range of metaphors coming from different 'domains' or 'subdomains'. One should also remember that ascribing particular phrases – instances of conceptual metaphors – to semantic domains is quite arbitrary (the meaning of a phrase is always contextual and changes from case to case).

What interests me more is the relative importance of both conceptual levels. Lakoff seems to believe that most of our thinking is done thanks to 'systematic mappings' (conventional metaphors in everyday language). They are thus 'more alive' – or conceptually productive – than one-shot mappings. This view is starkly opposed to the Romantic vision of thought and language, as expressed – for instance – in Humboldt's 'energetic definition' of language which "is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energie*). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated *mental labour* of making the *articulated* sound capable of expressing *thought*" (Humboldt 1999: 49). From this

point of view, language is truly alive when we try to capture an original idea by discovering unprecedented means of linguistic articulation.

We find a similar sentiment in Shelley's statement, which is directly related to metaphor: "Language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts: and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse" (quoted in Richards 1965: 91). Shelley talks here about the task of 'apprehension' of new objects of thought (i.e. of yet unnoticed 'relations of things'). This task of revelation requires the use of metaphor – it requires a 'twisting' of the conventional means of expression to direct thinking down a new lane. Such creative metaphors are not based on 'semantic transfers'. They are rather like springboards, they require a leap of imagination.

This can be seen better if we return to Thoreau's passage. When discussing it, I said that in order to arrive at the meaning of a metaphor, we should view the tenor from the vantage point of the vehicle. In this particular context, we should view 'the anglers' outings' (tenor) as if they were 'stitches' (vehicle). The choice of the vehicle, as we already know, was motivated either by the image of footprints in the snow seen from a bird's eye view, or by a more abstract vision of the anglers' regular travels to the pond and back again (or simultaneously by both these images). The task of the reader is to reconfigure the scene in such a way that one can see 'stitching' as the most appropriate articulation of an 'integral thought', to quote Shelley. Several clues in the text suggest that the 'wild men' are instruments in the hands of Nature or Nature's envoys (the most important one, I believe, is the perspective adopted: the scene must be viewed from a sufficient distance to include the pond and the towns; as a result, the anglers are hardly noticeable). It may seem that Nature herself uses 'wild men' to 'stitch' the rifts caused by towns in the 'fabric' of wild life. This example shows that a live metaphor ('one-shot metaphor' in Lakoff's terminology) is not about a 'conceptual transfer', but about an active reconfiguration of a scene. It is used to guide one's own thinking (as long as it is not sufficiently crystallised) and the reader's attention, in order to arrive at a new – more or less unconventional – vision of things. To put it simply, live metaphors are used to apprehend revelations.

There remains the question raised in the title of this article. How is this issue conceived by our protagonists? Lakoff focuses on the end-state. He thinks that when we have a number of related conventional expressions, this is a symptom of a single mechanism of generation (systematic mapping in the Cognitive Unconscious). Shelley, on the other hand, focuses on the initial state: the act of apprehension with metaphor. From his point of view, there are 'nobler' and 'lower' uses of language. Grasping something new is the nobler task – that of poets, who truly think. Common people do not have 'integral thoughts', but only repeat unreflectively what poets have discovered, and in the process 'chop up' the poetic vision into 'portions or classes of thought'. Conventional metaphor is language degraded.

The two approaches are rooted in opposite traditions. Lakoff's view is 'scientific': he looks for a mechanism, a system behind a range of phenomena. Shelley's view is 'romantic': he perceives phenomena as the work of a creative spirit. Lakoff's approach is certainly at odds with the social, historical nature of his object. Conventional metaphors are not generated in the Cognitive Unconscious but in the life of a community. They manifest a semblance of 'rational design', because a given perspective on things (e.g. that an argument is like a war) is taken up repeatedly through centuries and used for expressive purposes at hand. On the other hand, Shelley's 'poetic' genesis of language seems to be an exaggeration. He is certainly right about the importance of the ability to find new perspectives, to get new things into focus through metaphor. But his view of social reality as constituted by disorganised poetic visions is obviously wide of the mark.

Despite Lakoff's boastings, the connections between metaphorical language, thought and reality remain as mysterious as ever.

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## Streszczenie

### Śmierć metafory

W niniejszym artykule poddaję krytycznej analizie ideę „metafory pojęciowej”, rozwiniętą przez Lakoffa i Johnsona. W ich ujęciu „metafora” nie polega już na „twórczym użyciu języka”, lecz na „transferze pojęciowym” w „nieświadomości kognitywnej”. Ta zmiana perspektywy prowadzi do daleko idących konsekwencji w obrębie teorii znaczenia, a nawet natury ludzkiej. Moim celem jest prezentacja jednego z aspektów nowego ujęcia – kwestii metafory „żywej i martwej”. Dla rozjaśnienia tej kwestii przeciwstawiam kognitywną teorię metafory Lakoffa i Johnsona romantycznej wizji metafory i języka, przedstawionej na przykładzie wypowiedzi Humboldta, Shelleya i Richardsa.

