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"Metaphor Wars": Time for a Truce?

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"*Metaphor Wars*": Time for a truce?

Metaphor wars: Conceptual metaphors in human life.
By Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.
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Are metaphorical words and phrases merely clever use (or abuse) of language, or do they tell us something important about human thought and communication? Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), initially proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980, claims that commonplace metaphorical expressions like "rising prices" and "a warm relationship" reflect deep conceptual relationships (e.g. MORE IS UP and AFFECTION IS TEMPERATURE) that shape almost all of human cognition. CMT is supported by the "embodiment hypothesis," the proposal that ordinary language use and comprehension involves areas of the brain primarily concerned with perception and muscle control (e.g. Barsalou, 1998). These ideas challenge core assumptions of traditional theories about both language and mind, and they have drawn intense criticism.

Based on evidence from his own and others' research, Raymond Gibbs, Jr. has been a major contributor to developing the embodiment hypothesis and a leading defender of CMT. The "metaphor wars" in the title (ARGUMENT IS WAR) expresses both the often heated nature of the theoretical disputes and Gibbs's frustration with the failure of many critics to address the extensive empirical evidence in support of the embodiment hypothesis and CMT. The WAR metaphor implies symbolic violence and "zero-sum" outcomes of victory or defeat. Yet, throughout the book, Gibbs emphasizes the value of ideas from both sides of the debate and insists that no one theory will explain everything. The tone and apparent intention of the book seem better captured by an alternative metaphor such as ARGUMENT IS BUSINESS AND NEGOTIATION (Gerard Steen, quoted in Rasulić, 2017), or perhaps ARGUMENT IS CONSTRUCTION or ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY.

Background: Setting the stage

This book seems to mark a kind of "milepost" or perhaps even a "turning point" in the development of Gibbs's own theoretical views (ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY). He draws on his own extensive experimental research as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of others' research, first to explain the major criticisms of CMT, then to refute many of these criticisms, and finally to qualify and moderate claims of CMT that have not been fully supported by empirical research, thereby building a foundation for a synthesis that would combine the stronger elements of several theories, including CMT.

Gibbs opens with a brief summary of the difference between the Cognitive Linguistics and traditional approaches that treat language, including metaphor, as distinct from both mind and experience. This is followed by a summary of the most important criticisms of CMT from a variety of perspectives including traditional linguistics theories. These sections provide the background for a detailed summary, analysis, and critique of the major criticisms of CMT and the embodiment hypotheses, which makes up the largest part of the book. Gibbs gives a brief, clear explanation of CMT and the embodiment hypothesis, but generally assumes a relatively sophisticated knowledge of both language theory and of current metaphor theories. The book will primarily appeal to scholars, researchers, and advanced students who are already well-versed in CMT, competing theories of language and metaphor, and the on-going disputes between advocates for these alternative approaches.

The heart of the book: Review, critique, and synthesis.

Gibbs represents the theoretical issues at stake in this argument and the evidence supporting each position clearly and succinctly, and lays the foundation for future synthesis. The book is impressive for Gibbs's encyclopedic mastery of an enormous volume of research, and for his balanced and thoughtful treatment of research that contradicts his own views. He refutes

some claims of other researchers but more frequently shows how the claims of research from different perspectives might be integrated into a broader, more complex account of metaphor use and comprehension. The overall tone of the book is transitional, marked by debates not only with other researchers and scholars, but also within Gibbs's own conceptualization of the topic. That is a decided strength of the book: It's like looking over the shoulder of one of the top researchers in cognitive linguistics as he wrestles with a mass of contradiction-ridden research findings and balances the apparent contradictions – never understating the complexity of the issues.

Although his review of contradictory research is generally thorough and balanced, there are a few places in which Gibbs overlooks potentially important research. In the introductory chapter, Gibbs contextualizes the discussion within a rejection of the traditional computational model of mind and language, specifically citing and disagreeing with Pinker. Here he might usefully have cited Barsalou (1998 and subsequent), who demonstrates that all higher-order cognitive processes can in principle be accomplished through fully embodied "perceptual simulations."

In his review of alternative approaches to metaphor comprehension Gibbs briefly mentions Kintsch's demonstration that an approach based on natural language statistics (co-occurrence of words and phrases) can account for at least simple idiomatic metaphors. Here it might have been useful to acknowledge the evidence from some of Kintsch's colleagues (e.g. Landauer & Dumais, 1997) that much of our vocabulary (presumably including idiomatic metaphors Gibbs discusses, like "kick the bucket" and "spill the beans") is learned initially through connections with other language as it is encountered in spoken and written contexts, and

not through direct correlation with embodied experience. Landauer and Dumais's work might also contribute to an eventual "grand synthesis" theory of metaphor.

In his otherwise astute discussion of framing research, including Thibodeau and Boroditsky's "crime is a *beast* / *virus*" experiments, Gibbs fails to address the recent research by Steen, Reijnierse, and Burgers (2013), who replicated Thibodeau and Boroditsky and found no evidence of framing effects, implying that metaphorical framing may be weaker than previously claimed. In his discussion of neurological research using fMRI, Gibbs also fails to address the trenchant criticisms by Casasanto and Gijssels (2015), who demonstrate flaws in the fMRI research that has generally supported CMT and contrast it with fMRI other research that has found no evidence of embodiment effects.

In his discussion of Steen's Deliberate Metaphor Theory, Gibbs rightly criticizes Steen's failure to consider experimental evidence showing that people respond at least weakly to the metaphors implied by idioms like "*chew on* an idea" or "*warm* relationship." However, he rather too easily dismisses Steen's claim that metaphors are sometimes used *deliberately* (i.e. as a result of conscious deliberation and selection). Indeed, Gibbs's argument against deliberate metaphor use is implicitly contradicted by some of his own claims. For example, on p. 173, he observes that "asking people to explain their thoughts when using verbal metaphors provides one kind of empirical evidence on the existence of conceptual metaphors…" If people are able to respond in this way they must also be able to deliberate about and report their deliberations about metaphor use, consistent with Steen. The point that Steen ignores experimental evidence of embodied response to commonplace metaphor vehicles is well-taken, and Steen might further be criticized for conflating characteristics of the message, which can be observed and measured, with thought processes of the message originator and perceivers' attributions about the originator, neither of

which can be directly observed. However, the fact that neither researcher nor research participant can have direct knowledge of an originator's thought processes doesn't support the stronger claim that metaphors are never or even rarely used deliberately, or that attributions of intentionality might influence a perceiver's processing effort. As noted above, these are minor issues in a generally thorough and insightful review of metaphor research.

Summary: The state of play

CMT was proposed as an elegantly simple theory based on the idea that human thought is fundamentally metaphorical, that concepts are based on metaphorical mappings in which abstract concepts like LOVE and LIFE are experienced as embodied concepts like WARMTH and MOTION THROUGH SPACE. As initially proposed, these conceptual metaphors are fixed and more or less universal. Subsequent research has muddied this initial clarity in several ways. Most importantly, research has consistently shown that the "source domains" of conceptual metaphors are at least weakly activated whenever metaphorical language is processed, supporting one of the fundamental claims of CMT. On the other hand, based on the accumulating evidence: (1) research has failed to substantiate in any conclusive way that these weak activations have a consistent effect on outcomes such as beliefs and opinions, (2) people do not necessarily interpret metaphors the same way and do not associate the same CMs with metaphors, and (3) many other aspects of a communicative situation independently affect metaphor use and interpretation. CMT emerges from Gibbs's review as an elegant and powerful theory about the interconnectedness of mind, language, and embodied experience that has been only partially supported by subsequent, often contradictory, research. As Gibbs highlights throughout the book, many aspects of the theory remain undecided pending further research. However,

supporters as well as critics of CMT will need to give thoughtful consideration to Gibbs's

analysis and critique of evidence on both sides of the issue.

Overall assessment

This book, by one of the top researchers in cognitive linguistics, is an important

contribution to the debate about how people use and understand metaphor. Its flaws are few and

minor; its strengths many. The book provides a comprehensive review and critique of the

current state of research and theory about metaphor, and a solid foundation for developing a

"grand synthesis" theory of metaphor use and comprehension. Scholars and researchers with

even a secondary interest in metaphor theory, language theory, or general theories of cognition

will find this book important and engaging. Scholars and researchers engaged directly in

metaphor research will find it essential reading.

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Bio note

L. David Ritchie is a Professor of Communication at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon (USA). His primary research focus is metaphor use, story-telling, and humor in naturally-occurring discourse including conversation, political speeches, and environmental communication. He is the author of two books on metaphor, Context and Connection in Metaphor, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Metaphor (CUP, 2013), and has another book forthcoming, Metaphorical Stories in Discourse (CUP).