

# Metaphors we live by

George Lakoff, Mark Johnson 1980. London, University of Chicago Press

## A personal summary...

This highly influential book was written after the two authors met, in 1979, with a joint interest in metaphor, and a shared concern about the way Western philosophy and linguistics treats meaning (they felt it had little to do with what “people find *meaningful* in their lives”). This is a very brief summary of a 175 page book. There is no substitute for reading the original!

The focus of the book is on the subconscious conceptual structures that govern the way we think, act, communicate and live. The authors’ premise is that these conceptual structures, although generally present only on a subconscious level, can be explored through the medium of language.

They use a lot of linguistic research evidence, which shows that most of the ordinary conceptual structures revealed in our language are metaphorical in nature. It is important to recognise the difference between these metaphors which structure our conceptual systems, and what might be called “poetic metaphors”. It is also very important to recognise that Lakoff and Johnson are not suggesting that these “ordinary” metaphors are simply devices of language. On the contrary, they propose that human thinking and sense-making relies on metaphor, which is then *revealed* in language.

## Structural metaphors

An examination is made of the structured and systematic way that metaphorical concepts work, with a number of examples (such as “Rational Argument is War” and “Time is money”) to demonstrate the “entailments” (ie the systematic relationships between metaphors and their subcategories – for example “Time is money” entails that “Time is a limited resource”, which entails that “Time is a valuable commodity” etc).

The authors are careful to emphasise that the metaphorical structuring they describe can only ever be partial (time is not *actually* money). In viewing a concept (such as time) with a metaphor, some aspects of that concept are revealed (for instance, the way time is treated as a commodity) and other things are hidden. A different metaphor (such as “Time is a landscape we move through”) would reveal other aspects of the concept (as in the sense that “my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday is looming up on the horizon”).

## Oriental metaphors

Structural metaphors are a way of understanding one concept (often an abstract one) in terms of another (often a more concrete one). Oriental metaphors can be overlaid on structural metaphors, and often provide a spatial dimension (such as “up or down” and “in or out”). The

authors propose that these orientational metaphors arise specifically because of the kinds of bodies we have as human beings, and the kind of environments we live in (as English speakers especially). That is to say, they are *experiential*. Examples of these orientational metaphors are “happy is up; sad is down” and “virtue is up; depravity is down”.

## Ontological metaphors

A common way of understanding our experiences in the world is by viewing them as objects, or substances (such as “I’ve got a *mountain* of work to do” or “share prices are *falling through the floor*”). This makes them easier to refer to, categorise, and quantify. Lakoff and Johnson reasonably suggest that our experience of objects (and our own bodies) gives rise to this phenomenon, and they use the term “ontological metaphor”.

Ontological metaphors can be containers, for example “how did you *get out of* doing the washing up?”, or “now you’re *in* trouble”.

Another illustration of ontological metaphors is in personification – such as “the cancer caught up with him”, or “his professionalism wouldn’t let him cheat”.

This is different to metonymy, where an entity is referred to through a related entity. Sometimes the metonymous entity is a part of the whole being referred to. Examples of these are: “the Hereford United manager brought in some muscle to help out the central defence” or use of “The Press” to refer to a group of journalists.

## Some more examples of ontological metaphors

As I tried to get to grips with these ideas it helped me to have lots of examples, such as:

### THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS

“...this is a *shaky* argument”, “what’s the *foundation* for that idea?”

### IDEAS ARE FOOD

“... I can’t digest your ideas when you say them that quickly”, “that’s food for thought”

### LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

“... I can feel the magnetism between us”, “I’m really attracted to you”

### LIFE IS A CONTAINER

“I’ve led a full life”, “there’s no room for you in my life”

## Experiential Gestalts

The authors challenge the idea that there are basic “building blocks” of reason, which cannot be reduced any further. This is a radical step in many ways. Most Western philosophy has assumed that certain a priori primitive concepts exist, and it is a combination of these that produces complex meaning. Lakoff and Johnson take the example of causation, and show that it is better understood as an “experiential gestalt”.

“A proper understanding of causation requires that it be viewed as a cluster of other components. But the cluster forms a gestalt – a whole that we human beings find more basic than the parts”. (p 70)

They describe 12 properties which characterise a “prototype” for causation. They propose that we experience causation as a gestalt, rather than engaging in the checking off of the properties on a virtual list. This is important, because causation is then analysable, and capable of metaphorical extension. This latter idea is expanded later, in the exploration of causation.

## Metaphorical Definition

A key section of the book describes the difference in the approach to definition and meaning taken by the authors, compared to the traditional (objectivist) one encountered in dictionaries. Lakoff and Johnson make it clear that they are most concerned with how human beings understand the world they live in. This means that rather than using definitions which describe only the inherent properties of a concept (such as love, or time) as a dictionary would, they describe how humans “get a handle” on that concept – how they use it, and relate to it.

A large section of the book is given over to a re-appraisal of the polarised debate between objectivism (which has dominated Western philosophical thought since the ancient Greeks) and subjectivism (which dates from the early twentieth century and in particular the existentialists, and phenomenology). They end up rejecting this dichotomy, having looked in detail at how either approach fails to adequately account for human experience and understanding. In its place, they propose a third approach, an “experientialist synthesis”. They describe how metaphor is able to bring together the objectivist demand for absolute truth, with the subjectivist call for unconstrained imagination. They call this synthesis “imaginative rationality”.

*“Since the categories of our everyday thought are largely metaphorical and our everyday reasoning involves metaphorical entailments and inferences, ordinary rationality is therefore imaginative by its very nature. Given our understanding of poetic metaphor in terms of metaphorical entailments and inferences, we can see that the products of the poetic imagination are, for the same reason, partially rational in nature.”* (p 193)

There are crucial elements of our everyday experiences which cannot be fully understood: for instance emotional responses, aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual awareness. Metaphor, the authors claim, enables a *partial* comprehension through the process of imaginative rationality.

They call this an “*experientialist synthesis*” because they show that our understanding of the world necessarily arises out of our interaction with it.

## The limitations of objectivism and subjectivism

A good deal of space in the final part of the book is given over to a detailed examination of the limitations of both objectivism and subjectivism – essentially enlarging on the points described above. The objectivist account of conventional metaphors is based on them being simply devices of language, based on homonyms, with separate (literal) meanings. Conventionally used metaphors (such as “let me just *run* through the list with you”) must at some stage, according to the objectivist account, have been a figurative use of language, probably based on some similarity in the objective definitions of the two terms involved (perhaps, in this example, the physical activity of running, and the mental activity of thinking about a sequence). When first used, this would have been a “live” metaphor – but over time, with repeated use, the metaphor died, and became a conventional way of speaking. There would then be a “dead metaphor” with two homonyms – in this example, two definitions of the word “run” – one referring to a mental process, one to a physical activity. The problem with this process, the authors argue, is that it depends on there being pre-existent, *inherent* similarities. However, it is unsustainable to present a clear enough definition of the inherent, objective properties of abstract concepts such as “thinking about a sequence”) on which to base this comparison. Rather, they argue that the similarities that exist are *interactional and experiential* and arise from the way we conceptualise our experiences of the world. As the properties are not inherent, but interactional, this can no longer support an objectivist worldview.

The exploration of subjectivism is shorter, but centres on what they see as the assumption that “experience has no natural structure and that, therefore, there can be no natural external constraints upon meaning and truth.” This approach is countered with Lakoff and Johnson’s view that experience *is* structured, in an holistic way, in terms of experientialist gestalts. Their demonstration of the structured nature of experience therefore dismisses the subjectivist view as an adequate basis for meaning.

## Causation

In 2003 the authors added an “Afterword” to the original book, reviewing what had happened to their theories in the intervening 23 years. They express a lot of satisfaction in the fact that a great deal more empirical evidence now supports their view.

One area that they highlight is that of causation, which has been investigated with a methodology they call “deep analysis”. They describe how rather than there being one single kind of causal logic structuring the world, there are more than twenty, for instance:

Causation can be conceptualised as:

*Forced motion to a new location* (as in “Scientific developments have propelled us into the Digital Age”)

*The giving and taking of objects* (as in “These vitamins will give you energy”)

*Links* (as in “Cancer has been linked to pesticide use”)

*Motion along a path* (as in China is on the road to democracy, having taken the path of capitalism”)

These ideas are expanded much further in Lakoff and Johnson’s later book, “Philosophy in the Flesh” (1999).

The authors also note one or two errors they now perceive in their original arguments, and explain these further. They finish with a summary of their central points:

- Metaphors are fundamentally conceptual in nature; metaphorical language is secondary
- Conceptual metaphors are grounded in everyday experience
- Abstract thought is largely, though not entirely, metaphorical
- Metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious
- Abstract concepts have a literal core, but are extended by metaphors, often by many mutually inconsistent metaphors.
- Abstract concepts are not complete without metaphors. For example, love is not love without metaphors of magic, attraction, madness, union, nurturance, and so on.
- Our conceptual systems are not consistent overall, since the metaphors used to reason about concepts may be inconsistent.
- We live our lives on the basis of inferences we derive via metaphor.

Mark Waters, September 2008