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Kisses Sweeter Than Wine: Metaphor and the Making of Meaning

Midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace, it is metaphor which most produces knowledge.
—Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Let's go back to the kissing scene on Martha's video described previously. There is something else in that scene that is semiotically interesting. During the small talk that followed the kissing action, Ted can be heard saying, "Your kisses are sweeter than wine, Cheryl." As you might surmise by now, a semiotician would not construe Ted's statement as merely a figure of speech chosen to embellish his compliment. Unlike most people, who hardly notice such expressions, having become so accustomed to hearing and using them, the semiotician would see Ted's *metaphor* as revealing something much more fundamental about human meaning-making than meets the eye (to use a metaphor). To the semiotician, metaphor is the conceptual glue that binds all the meaning systems and codes in the system of everyday life together. Language is the code that most reveals how it works, although it is found in all other codes.

Metaphor brings us into an in-depth study of iconicity. Recall from Chap. 2 that icons are signs that stand for things by resemblance or simulation of some type. Metaphor does as well, but it does so in an imaginary abstract way. To say that a kiss is sweet involves a mental simulation of a sensory experience—sweetness—that is projected onto the experience of an emotion—love. In a nutshell, that is how metaphor works. It is an icon of an imagined experience—an attempt to make the abstract, imaginary world of mind understandable in concrete terms. Metaphorical expressions are so common and pervasive

that people hardly ever notice them. Although interest in metaphor is ancient, the study of its relation to cognition and culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. And the interest has soared. Since about the mid-1950s the amount of research on metaphor has been mind-boggling. There is currently so much information on metaphor scattered in journals and books that it would take a gargantuan effort just to organize and classify it. For this reason, I have had to be highly selective in this chapter.

Aristotle and the Discovery of Metaphor

If a very young child were to ask a parent “What is love?” one thing the parent would not do is give the child an encyclopedic definition of love. Rather, the parent would relate it to an experience that is familiar to the child: “Well, you know, love is like...when mummy or daddy kisses or hugs you...and that makes you feel warm and cozy inside, right?” Adults say things such as this all the time because they intuitively know that children can relate an abstract concept such as *love* to an emotional event or feeling connected with it. This is exactly what metaphor allows people to do—to link an abstraction to something concrete, familiar, or experienced. People the world over use similar “metaphorical elucidations” to explain morals, ideas, values, and other abstractions to children. Metaphor is *the* faculty that makes *Homo sapiens* sapient, yet it is still largely the popular view that it is a device of poets—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language.

The term *metaphor*, itself a metaphor (*meta* “beyond” and *pherein* “to carry”), was coined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who saw it as much more than poetic license. Take the notion of *life*. How would one answer the question “What is life?” As Aristotle knew, there really is no literal way to answer this question satisfactorily. Aware of this, the poet would probably write a poem about it, the dramatist a play. The common person, too, would come up with something just as inventive (albeit on a much smaller scale). Someone might say that “life is a stage.” Incredibly, that would be the end of the matter, for such an answer invariably seems to satisfy the questioner. The word *life* refers to something that we know exists, but when asked to describe it, there is virtually no way of conveying its meaning sufficiently in literal words. This is because the notion of *life* is something abstract, and thus produces no concrete images to which we can put literal words. A *stage*, on the other hand, is something we can visualize, and thus describe easily in such words—it is a raised platform on which theatrical performances are presented, in which actors perform actions according to their roles, and so on. Now, the use of *stage* to describe *life* makes this notion intelligible. No further explanations are needed.

Remarkably, in having described life as a stage, we now have a different understanding or view of what life means. Indeed, if one were asked “How would you change your life?” the metaphor itself would suggest the vocabulary required to formulate a viable answer. For example, one could say that a change in *role* or *setting* (whatever the case may be) would be appropriate to change one’s life. In other words, the original metaphor, by its very nature, teaches and guides us by the new information it produces, as if by *magic*. Metaphor is, in fact, word magic in its most common, albeit largely unrecognized, form. Aristotle suggested that people use metaphor not only to render intelligible what is abstract, but also to create new meanings, to seek new insights, to discover new concepts, and, remarkably, no special intellectual powers are required. The ability to coin and use metaphors is an innate skill of all humans, no matter how much intelligence or erudition they may have.

Given its apparent open-endedness—one could have related *life* to many other visualizable things (to a river, to the seasons, and so on)—the question that comes to mind is how do we go about gleaning the meaning of a given metaphor? Aristotle answered this question rather cleverly. He suggested that a metaphor is like a logical proportion that people must figure out in terms of the formula **A** is to **B** as **C** is to **D**. For example, consider the meaning of “Old age is the evening of life.” If *old age* is the **A** in the proportion, *life* the **B**, and *evening* the **C**, then a successful interpretation of the metaphor lies in figuring out the **D** in this formula: *old age* (**A**) is to *life* (**B**) as *evening* (**C**) is to (= **D**)? The answer to this logical puzzle is *twilight*: *old age* is to *life* as *evening* is to *twilight*. This proportion, incidentally, pervades mythical and literary traditions throughout the world. It is found in the legend of Oedipus the King and the Sphinx—the mythical creature with the head and breasts of a woman, the body of a lion, a serpent tail, and the wings of a bird who guarded entrance to the ancient city of Thebes. When Oedipus approached the city, so the legend goes, the Sphinx confronted him, posing the following riddle to him: “What is it that has four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three at twilight?” Failure to answer it correctly meant instant death—a fate that had befallen all who had ventured to Thebes before Oedipus. The fearless Oedipus answered: “Humans, who crawl on all fours as infants, then on two legs, and finally with a cane in old age.” Upon hearing the correct answer, the Sphinx killed itself, and Oedipus entered Thebes as a hero for having gotten rid of the terrible monster that had kept the city enslaved for a long period of time.

Various versions of the Sphinx’s riddle exist. The one paraphrased above is adapted from the play *Oedipus Rex* by the Greek dramatist Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE). Whatever its version, it is evidence that since the dawn of history people come to an understanding of life through metaphor. As humanity’s first recorded riddle, the Riddle of the Sphinx provides us, in fact, with an

early model of how metaphor manifests itself in human affairs. Often, Aristotle emphasized, metaphorical reasoning provides the only way to understand or describe something. In English, we use an agrarian term in the sentence “The ship *plowed* through the ocean,” not as a mere idiomatic choice, but because it is the only way we can talk about that action. So, too, with many other concepts. The notion of “mental depth,” for instance, is a product of metaphorical reasoning. That is why in English we talk about thoughts as being *deep*, *profound* (a word that contains the Latin *fundus* “bottom”), or *shallow*, even though we do not consciously experience actual physical depth when using such words.

Giambattista Vico

Aristotle himself claimed that, as knowledge-productive as it was, metaphor is essentially a poetic device. The basis of language is thus literal meaning and figurative language is essentially rhetorical embellishment. Two millennia went by before someone was perceptive enough to grasp fully the relevance of metaphor to human cognition—the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744).

Like Aristotle, Vico saw metaphor as *the* strategy by which people come to grips with abstract knowledge. However, he went further than Aristotle, attributing the ability to use metaphor to the workings of the human imagination, the *fantasia*, as he called it. The first symbols of humanity, Vico claimed, were sensory metaphors revealing a strategy of knowing that he called *poetic*¹ because, like poets, people reflect on what they have sensed by inventing words that are designed to resemble their sensory responses. These words are metaphors and upon them human cultures are constructed. In the earliest stage of culture-making—which he called the age of the gods—human groups created religion, marriage rites, burial rites, and other basic institutions and rituals. These are based on common sense, which Vico defined as “judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire nation, or the entire human race.”² Since these institutions originated “among entire peoples unknown to each other” they must have a “common ground of truth.”³ Vico called this primordial phase of culture the age of the gods, because it was a reaction to an intense fear of gods, to whom early people ascribed frightful events such as thunder and lightning. In the succeeding age of heroes, a dominant class of humans—the heroes of the evolving culture—emerged typically to subjugate the common people. These were men with great physical prowess who inspired fear and admiration in people, shaping cultural institutions to

satisfy their goals and aspirations. After a period of domination, a third stage—the age of equals—is brought about by the common people rising up and winning equality. However, in the process, society gradually starts to disintegrate by force of “the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits” that turn ordinary people “into beasts made inhuman by the barbarism of reflection.”⁴ At this point, Vico claimed, a culture has run its course, expiring “under soft words and embraces.”⁵

The third age is an age of decline, of subtle irony and wit. Language is shallow, dispassionate, devoid of the poetic. However, all is not lost. On the contrary, because of the *fantasia*, we start once again to seek new meanings to life, becoming once more “religious, truthful, and faithful.”⁶ In this renewal, or *ricorso* as Vico called it, new metaphors are invented fostering new thoughts, new forms of expression. The lesson of history, Vico concludes, is that human beings are constantly *reinventing* themselves, but in so doing are unwittingly following a larger goal: “It is true that men themselves made this world of nations, but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves.”⁷

I. A. Richards

More than a century after Vico, another philosopher, the German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), became both intrigued and disconcerted by the power of metaphor, identifying it as humanity’s greatest flaw because it allowed people to create an illusory reality in their minds and then to believe it as being true. The growing interest in metaphor shifted away from philosophy toward the scientific domain with the founding of experimental psychology in Leipzig, Germany in 1879 by the German physicist Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–87) and the German linguist and physiologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920). The early psychologists were the first to conduct experiments with subjects on how they processed figurative language. They found, for instance, that recall of a given metaphor was excellent if it was linked to a second one; otherwise it was easily forgotten. The early experiments thus suggested that metaphorical-associative thinking produced an effective retrieval form of memory and was, therefore, something to be investigated further by the fledgling science.

However, the scholar who kindled serious interest in metaphor as something much more than a rhetorical technique was a British literary critic—I. A. Richards (1893–1979). In his ground-breaking 1936 book, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards expanded upon Aristotle’s basic idea that the function of

metaphor was related to the acquisition of knowledge, by proposing a viable explanation of how this function unfolded.⁸ The meaning that a metaphor produces, Richards suggested, was due to an ontological interaction that is perceived to exist between the abstract topic of the metaphor (the *life* in “life is a stage”) and its concrete vehicle (the *stage* in “life is a stage”). Explaining an abstract notion (*life*) in terms of something concrete (a *stage*) is hardly a mere figurative (decorative) ploy. Rather, it implies that we feel that the two share similar properties in our experience of them. Richards called this perceived commonality of properties the *ground* of the metaphor—the common area of meaning shared by the topic and the vehicle in the mind of the speaker. Therefore, the metaphor “life is a stage,” was forged in the first place, not through a pure flight of poetic fancy, but because the maker of the metaphor saw *life* and *stages* as existing on the same ground in the mind. The mental perspective provided by metaphor is, in effect, a counterpart to physical perception; in English we say that *ideas* (an abstract topic) can be *approached, looked at, touched, taken apart, seen from different angles*, as if *ideas* had location in space and thus visible properties.

Richards’ theory provides insight into the uncanny power of metaphor to generate “feeling forms” of thought within the mind. Consider a common metaphor such as “John is a gorilla.” The topic in this case is a person named *John* and the vehicle the animal known as a *gorilla*. Describing *John* in terms of a *gorilla* implies that a conceptual interaction of physical and personality properties is perceived to exist between *John* and a *gorilla*. Now, even if we do not know the *John* alluded to in the metaphor, the metaphor forces us to think of *John* in terms of gorilla-like, simian traits. In our mind, we cannot help but see *John* looking and acting like a *gorilla*. Changing the vehicle shows this imaginary synesthetic effect even more sharply. If one were to call *John* a *snake*, a *pig*, or a *puppy*, then our image of *John* changes in kind—the person named *John* becomes serpentine, swine-like, and puppy-like in our mental view. John is, in short, what our metaphors say he is.

Following Richards’ ground-breaking work, in the 1950s the psychologist Solomon Asch investigated metaphors based on words for sensations (*hot, cold, heavy*, and so on) in several unrelated languages.⁹ Asch discovered something truly interesting, namely, that the same sense-projecting pattern was used in all the languages, even though the end results were different. For example, he found that *hot* stood for *rage* in Hebrew, *enthusiasm* in Chinese, *sexual arousal* in Thai, and *energy* in Hausa (the language of a people living in northern Nigeria, Niger, and adjacent areas). Intrigued by Asch’s findings, psychologists in the late 1950s and 1960s undertook similar studies, signaling a turning point in the study of metaphor. Indeed, since then, the amount of research on

this phenomenon has been truly astronomical. In 1979, the literary scholar W. Booth calculated that, given the number of books and articles on metaphor published in the year 1977 alone, by the year 2039 there would be “more students of metaphor on Earth than people!”¹⁰ The prediction was not itself simply a figure of speech—today, branches of linguistics, called cognitive linguistics or cognitive semantics—have arisen because of the study of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson

By the end of the 1970s scholars from different disciplines were convinced that metaphor was more than a metaphor (in the traditional sense). In one classic 1977 study, a series of verbal metaphors was presented to brain-damaged subjects who were asked to select one of four response pictures that best portrayed the meaning of each one.¹¹ For the sentence “A heavy heart can really make a difference” the subjects were shown four pictures from which to choose: a person crying (= metaphorical meaning); a person staggering under the weight of a huge red heart (= literal meaning); a 500-pound weight (= a representation emphasizing the adjective *heavy*); a red heart (= a representation emphasizing the noun phrase *red heart*). The subjects were divided into those with damage to their left hemisphere (LH), those with lesions in the right hemisphere (RH), and a normal control group. Normal and LH subjects gave up to five times as many metaphorical responses, but the RH group showed great difficulty in coming up with the appropriate metaphorical answers. The researchers, Ellen Winner and Howard Gardner, thus established a link between the meaning of a metaphor and the RH of the brain, since damage to that hemisphere obviously impeded comprehension of metaphor. This was not an inconsequential finding, because the RH is the cerebral area responsible for producing most of our mental images. Therefore, the idea that metaphor and mental imagery are intertwined turned out to be more than just speculation. In the same year, 1977, the psychologist Howard Pollio and his associates found that metaphor was a statistically pervasive force in everyday discourse.¹² They determined that speakers of English uttered, on average, 3000 novel metaphors and 7000 idiomatic expressions per week—a finding that laid the groundwork for the study that finally established metaphor as a fundamental area of concern for psychology and linguistics—George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s 1980 book, *Metaphors We Live By*.¹³ The innovative claim of that book was that metaphor is the cornerstone of language.

First, Lakoff and Johnson assert what Aristotle claimed two millennia before, namely, that there are two types of concepts—concrete and abstract. The two scholars add a notable twist to this Aristotelian dichotomy—namely, that *abstract concepts* are built up systematically from *concrete* ones through metaphorical reasoning. They thus renamed abstract concepts *conceptual metaphors*. These are generalized metaphorical formulas that define specific abstractions. Recall the earlier example of John and the animals to which he was associated metaphorically (gorilla, snake, pig, puppy). Each specific metaphor (“John is a gorilla,” “John is a snake,” and so on) is not an isolated example of poetic fancy. Moreover, since John can be replaced by any other person (Mary, Edward, and so on), each conceivable metaphorical combination (“John is a gorilla,” “Mary is a snake,” and so on) is really an example of a more general metaphorical formula: *people are animals*. Such formulas are what Lakoff and Johnson call *conceptual metaphors*. Each of the two parts is called a domain: *people* is the *target domain* because it is the abstract topic (the “target” of the conceptual metaphor); *animals* is the *source domain* because it is the class of vehicles that deliver the metaphor (the “source” of the metaphorical concept). An *abstract concept* can now be defined simply as a “mapping” of one domain onto the other. This model suggests that abstract concepts are formed systematically through such mappings and that specific metaphors (called *linguistic metaphors* in contrast to *conceptual metaphors*) are traces to the target and source domains. So, when we hear people talking, for instance, of *ideas* in terms of *geometrical figures and relations*—“Those ideas are *circular*,” “I don’t see the *point* of your idea,” “Her ideas are *central* to the discussion,” “Their ideas are *diametrically opposite*,” and so on—we can now easily identify the two domains as *ideas* (target domain) and *geometrical figures/relations* (source domain) and, therefore, the conceptual metaphor as: *ideas are geometrical figures and relations*.

Conceptual metaphors pervade common discourse. A few examples will suffice to make this evident.

Happiness is up/Sadness is down

I’m feeling *up*.

She’s feeling *down*.

That comment *boosted* my spirits.

My mood *sank* after I heard him speak.

Your joke gave me a *lift*.

Health and life are up/Sickness and death are down

I’m at the *peak* of my health.

He *fell* ill.

Life is an *uphill* struggle.
Lazarus *rose* from the dead.
He's *sinking* fast.

Light is knowledge/Dark is ignorance

I was *illuminated* by that professor.
I was left in the *dark* about what happened.
That idea is very *clear*.
Their theory is *obscure*.
His example *shed light* on several matters.

Theories are buildings

That is a *well-constructed* theory.
His theory is on *solid ground*.
That theory needs *support*.
Their theory *collapsed* under criticism.
She put together the *framework* of a very interesting theory.

Ideas and theories are plants

Her ideas have come to *fruition*.
That's a *budding* theory.
Aristotle's ideas have contemporary *offshoots*.
That idea has become a *branch* of mathematics.

Ideas are commodities

He certainly knows how to *package* his ideas.
That idea just won't *sell*.
There's no *market* for that idea.
That's a *worthless* idea.

As Lakoff and Johnson emphasize, we do not detect the presence of conceptual metaphors in such common expressions because of repeated usage. We no longer interpret the word *see* metaphorically in utterances such as "I don't *see* what you mean," "Do you *see* what I'm saying?" because its metaphorical uses have become so familiar to us. However, the association between the biological act of seeing outside the body with the imaginary act of seeing within the mind was originally the source of the conceptual metaphor, *seeing is understanding/believing/thinking*, which now permeates common discourse:

There is more to this than *meets the eye*.
I have a different *point of view*.
It all depends on how you *look* at it.

I take a *dim view* of the whole matter.
 I never *see eye to eye* on things with you.
 You have a different *worldview* than I do.
 Your ideas have given me great *insight* into life.

In the inner world of abstractions, ideas, like objects, can be seen, looked into, scanned, moved, arranged. This is why we have expressions such as *broad-minded*, *far-sighted*, *far-reaching*, *far-fetched*, *narrow-minded*, *short-sighted*, *worldview*, *insight*, *foresight*, and *hindsight*. As Walter Ong has pointed out, the universality of such words suggests that “we would be incapacitated for dealing with knowledge and intellection without massive visualist conceptualization, that is, without conceiving of intelligence through models applying initially to vision.”¹⁴

The next important point made by Lakoff and Johnson is that there are several general kinds of cognitive processes involved in metaphor. The first one involves orientation. This produces concepts that are derived from our physical experiences of orientation—*up* versus *down*, *back* versus *front*, *near* versus *far*, and so on. For example, the experience of *up* versus *down* underlies conceptual metaphors such as:

<i>Happiness is up</i>	=	I'm feeling <i>up</i> .
<i>Sadness is down</i>	=	She's feeling <i>down</i> today.
<i>More is up</i>	=	My income rose (went <i>up</i>) last year.
<i>Less is down</i>	=	Her salary went <i>down</i> after her change of job.

This *up* versus *down* schema derives from the accumulated experiences of standing upright, climbing stairs, and looking up or down. Let us assume, as a hypothetical scenario, that this image spontaneously appeared in the mind of an individual during a conversation in association with a topic that involved the notion of quantity (for example, *prices*). That individual might have said something like “Prices keep going up.” Caught by the force of this metaphorical image, a listener might have imitated the model, answering with something like “Yes, and my earnings have fallen.” Continued associations between *up* and *more* and *down* and *less*—that is, between orientation and quantity—in routine communicative exchanges are what led over time to the establishment of the abstract concept: *more is up/less is down*. Lakoff and Johnson claim that the experiential forces at work in conceptualization constantly produce such *image schemas*.¹⁵ These are defined as largely unconscious mental outlines of recurrent shapes, actions, dimensions, and so on that derive from perception and sensation. Image schemas are so deeply rooted that we are hardly ever aware of their control over conceptualization, but they can always be conjured

up easily.¹⁶ If someone were to ask you to explain an idiom such as *spill the beans*, you would not likely have a conscious image schema involving beans and the action of spilling them. However, if that same person were to ask you the following questions—“Where were the beans before they were spilled?” “How big was the container?” “Was the spilling on purpose or accidental?”—then you would no doubt start to visualize the appropriate schema. You would see the beans as kept in a container and the container as being about the size of the human head.

An interesting type of image schema is, in fact, that of the container. This produces conceptual metaphors in which activities, emotions, and ideas are associated with entities and substances contained in something:

<i>The mind is a container</i>	=	I'm <i>full</i> of memories.
<i>Anger is fluid in a container</i>	=	You make my blood <i>boil</i> .

There are other types of image schemas underlying conceptualization, of course. Suffice it to say here that, in all cases, the source domain is something that has either experiential force or, by cultural conditioning, particular salience in the mind of people. This can be seen in the following examples:

<i>Argument is war</i>	=	I <i>demolished</i> his argument.
<i>Labor is a resource</i>	=	He was <i>consumed</i> by his job.
<i>Time is a resource</i>	=	Time is <i>money</i> .

To get a firmer sense of how such concepts shape discourse, consider the *argument is war* metaphor. The target domain of *argument* is conceptualized in terms of *warlike activities* (the source domain), and thus in terms of battles that can be won or lost, of positions that can be attacked or guarded, of ground that can be gained or lost, of lines of attack that can be abandoned or defended, and so on. These warlike images are so embedded in our mind that we do not normally realize that they guide our perception of, and emotional reactions to, arguments. Nonetheless, they are there, surfacing regularly in such common expressions as the following:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 You *attacked* all my *weak points*.
 Your criticisms were *right on target*.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 I've never *won* an argument.
 She *shot down* all my points.
 If you use that *strategy*, I'll *wipe you out*.

The last relevant point made by Lakoff and Johnson in their truly fascinating book is that culture is built on conceptual metaphors, since these coalesce into a system of meanings. This is accomplished by a kind of “higher-order” metaphorizing—that is, as target domains are associated with many kinds of source domains, the concepts they underlie become increasingly more abstract and interconnected, leading to what Lakoff and Johnson call *idealized cultural* or *cognitive models* (ICMs). To understand what this means, consider the target domain of *ideas* again. The following three conceptual metaphors, among many others, deliver the meaning of this concept in three separate ways, constituting a slice of the ICM for this concept:

Ideas are food

Those ideas left a *sour taste* in my mouth.
It's hard to *digest* all those ideas at once.
Even though he is a *voracious* reader; he can't *chew* all those ideas.
That teacher is always *spoon-feeding* her students.

Ideas are people

Darwin is the *father* of modern biology.
Those medieval ideas continue to *live on* even today.
Cognitive linguistics is still in its *infancy*.
Maybe we should *resurrect* that ancient idea.
She *breathed* new life into that idea.

Ideas are fashion

That idea went out of *style* several years ago.
Those scientists are the *avant-garde* of their field.
Those revolutionary ideas are no longer in *vogue*.
Semiotics has become truly *chic*.
That idea is an old *hat*.

Recall from other examples, cited earlier, that there are other ways of conceptualizing *ideas*—for example, in terms of *buildings* (“That is a well-constructed theory”), *plants* (“That theory has deep roots”), *commodities* (“That theory will not sell”), *geometry* (“Those are parallel theories”), and *seeing* (“That is a clearly articulated theory”). The constant juxtaposition of such conceptual formulas in common everyday thinking produces, cumulatively, an idealized cognitive model (ICM) of ideas.

ICMs allow us to get a glimpse into cultural groupthink.¹⁷ Everything that I have written in this book, too, has been structured by ICMs. This applies to

any verbal text. Listen to a news broadcast, a sermon, a political speech, or read any textbook, newspaper article, blog, Facebook page, tweet, and you will soon realize how each text has been woven together with the handiwork of metaphor. When a preacher talks about the need for being “cleansed” or “purified” he or she is utilizing the concrete force of the *sex is dirty* conceptual metaphor to impart a moral feeling of “uncleanness” to believers.

Metaphor is also the source of innovation. As Vico argued, the metaphorical capacity is tied to the *fantasia*, which predisposes human beings to search out or forge new meanings. This is why novel metaphors are being created all the time. If someone were to say “Life is a cup of coffee,” it is unlikely that you would have heard this expression before, because it is not (as far as I can tell) a routine option within English conversation. However, its novelty forces you to reflect upon its meaning. The vehicle used, a cup of coffee, is a common object and therefore easily perceivable as a source for thinking about everyday life. The metaphor compels us to start thinking of life in terms of the kinds of physical, gustatory, social, and other attributes that are associated with a cup of coffee. For this metaphor to gain currency, however, it must capture the fancy of many other people for a period of time. Then and only then will its novelty have become worn out and will it become the basis for a new conceptual metaphor: *life is a drinking substance in its appropriate container*. After that, expressions such as “life is a cup of tea,” “life is a bottle of beer,” “life is a glass of milk,” and the like, all become similarly functional as offering different perspectives on life.

The ability to coin metaphors allows people not only to produce new concepts, but also to fill-in “knowledge gaps” in a creative way. Recall from the previous chapter how my grandson at fifteen months of age referred to our orange-haired household cat, Pumpkin, as *juice*, in obvious reference to the color of the orange juice that he drank on a regular basis. The child had obviously extracted the quality of “orangeness” from the liquid (the source domain) and applied it to a new referent—the cat’s hair (the target domain). As this example shows, metaphor is a “conceptual gap-filler.”

There are other figures of speech that occur in everyday discourse, but following Lakoff and Johnson’s discovery of conceptual metaphors, these are now considered subcategories of the general process of metaphor. Nevertheless, there are two that are regularly studied separately—*metonymy* and *irony*—because of their particular semantic characteristics:

Metonymy is the use of an entity to refer to another that is related to it; in other words, it exemplifies part-for-the-whole reasoning¹⁸:

She likes to read *Emily Dickinson* (= *the writings of Emily Dickinson*).

He's in *dance* (= *the dancing profession*).

My mom frowns on *blue jeans* (= *the wearing of blue jeans*).

New *windshield wipers* will satisfy him (= *the state of having new wipers*).

The *automobile* is destroying our health (= *the collection of automobiles*).

We need a couple of *strong bodies* for our teams (= *strong people*).

I've got a new *set of wheels* (= *car*).

We need *new blood* in this organization (= *new people*).

A conceptual formula of this type that requires special mention is *the face is the person*.

He's just another *pretty face*.

There are an awful lot of *faces* in the audience.

We need some new *faces* around here.

As we saw in Chap. 3, this concept also crystallizes in the nonverbal domain, especially in the art of portraiture. Expressions such as *saving face*, *face the music*, *putting on a happy/sad face* reveal our fascination with the face as a sign of character and personality. Unlike metaphor, metonymy does not function to create knowledge through associative-connective reasoning; rather, it allows people to cast specific mental light on certain situations, so as to make some social or personal comment on them. For instance, the use of *butt*, in expressions such as “Get your butt over here!” to stand for a *person*, forces us to focus on a part of human anatomy, the buttocks, that elicits images of laziness and indolence, given that the butt is the anatomical part used for sitting. In the choice of *buses* to stand for those who drive them as in “The buses are on strike” we are forced to evaluate the consequences of the strike. Metonymy is not productive of new knowledge. It is designed to allow people to provide perspective, opinion, point of view, or criticism.

Irony is, generally speaking, the use of words to convey a meaning contrary to their literal sense—“I love being tortured”; “That stupid plan is clever.” This is a remarkable form of discourse, based on exploiting the incongruities and complexities of an experience or a situation. As such, it is both a protective strategy, deflecting attention away from the self towards others, by which one can make value judgments without commitment, and a verbal weapon that can be used against others.¹⁹ In irony, the context is critical since without it a statement such as “I love being tortured” could be interpreted literally. If the person was a masochist, then this statement would hardly be construed as ironic. For irony to work, the person must be in real torment and dislike it.

Irony has various cognitive and social functions. Suppose, for example, that a ballet dancer trips several times and her choreographer says, “You were very graceful!” The choreographer is using irony so that the dancer will become aware that she knows of the trips and that something has to be done about them. Another function is to relay to an interlocutor something that others do not know. In *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, Oedipus kills a man. He does not know that the man is Laius, his father. Oedipus puts a curse on the slayer of Laius. The irony is that Oedipus has unknowingly cursed himself, since Laius turns out to be his unknown father. Irony is also used to highlight events that work out contrary to expectations. Suppose that a home town is preparing a party for a returning soldier. However, the soldier is killed in an accident on his way home. The irony comes from the contrast between the expectations of the people and the actual situation.

These examples show that metonymy and irony can be subsumed under the same cognitive process as metaphor. So, the part-for-the-whole structure of metonymy could be considered to be a mapping of a part of something (source) onto the whole (target). For instance, the *White House* is mapped by implication onto *the President* in an expression such as “The White House made its announcement yesterday.” Thus, the part of some concept is extracted from it, and then mapped back onto it. Irony can also be viewed as a mapping—in this case, a source domain consisting of an “opposite” notion is mapped onto a target so that the latter can be understood through the opposition. In “I love being tortured,” uttered by someone in pain, the concept of pain is highlighted through its opposite—pleasure. Again, *pleasure* is mapped onto *pain*, which requires an advanced form of interactive cognition, so to speak.

Blending Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory has received a lot of attention from cognitive scientists and semioticians ever since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s book in 1980. From the relevant research the concept of *blending* has emerged. In this model, metaphor is not simply the result of a mapping from one domain to another, as was originally posited, but rather the result of a cognitive mechanism that blends domains together and then maps them onto other domains. The vehicle and topic, when blended together, produce new understanding, which is the intended meaning of the blend.

Blending theory was introduced formally in 2002 by Fauconnier and Turner²⁰ who argued that the process of linking source and target domains occurs when someone recognizes that the two domains in a metaphor might

be mutually suggestive. A blend, once completed, is available for use in subsequent or additional blends. If this is so, then blending theory can also be used to explain any semiotic process, including the construction and interpretation of signs. Every signifier immediately suggests a signified and, by extension, various connotations. These are not separable cognitively; they co-occur. In effect, semiosis is evidence that blending may well be the way in which the brain creates and interprets information.

Love Is Indeed Sweet, Metaphorically Speaking

We are now in a better position to provide an appropriate semiotic explanation to Ted's metaphorical statement: "Your kisses are sweeter than wine." First, let's consider a few of the ways in which we conceptualize *love* in English-speaking culture.²¹

Love is a physical force

There were *sparks* between us.
We are *attracted* to each other.
My life *revolves* around her.
I am *magnetically drawn* toward her.

Love is a medical-health force

Theirs is a *sick* relationship.
Their romance is *dead*; it can't be *revived*.
Their relationship is *in good shape*.

Love is madness

I'm *crazy* about her.
I'm constantly *raving* about him.
He's gone *mad* over her.
I've *lost my head* over him.

Love is a magical force

She *cast* a spell over me.
The *magic* is gone.
She has *bewitched* me.
I'm *in a trance* over him.

Love is a sweet taste

You're so *sweet*.
She's my *sweetheart*.
He's my *honey*.

As these examples illustrate, *love* is indeed a multifaceted experience, as our stack of metaphors attest, and as the poets have always known. Ted's statement is really no more than a particular use of the conceptual metaphor *love is a sweet taste*, which commonly surfaces in courtship and romance situations. This formula is a special manifestation of a broader one: *love is a taste in one's mouth*. This is why we say that *love* that is no longer *sweet* can leave a *bad, sour, rotten* taste in one's mouth. Like wine, love can both please and displease. Therefore, as poetic as Ted might have appeared to his partner, he really was using a time-tested and time-worn formula to give a romantic verbal touch to his courtship performance.

As Alice Deignan has argued, the use of such metaphorical strategies is not restricted to the language of love; they are general strategies that allow people to encode subjective judgments in a way that conceals their subjectivity: "Speakers use a metaphorical expression to encode their approval, or—far more frequently—their disapproval, of a manifestation of desire. The evaluation, thereby, takes on the appearance of objectivity."²² Nor are such strategies peculiar to speakers of English. There are, in fact, many cross-cultural similarities in the ways in which sexual attractiveness and desire are modeled metaphorically. In the Chagga tribe of Tanzania, for example, the perception of *sex* and *love* as abstractions that can be "tasted" metaphorically manifests itself constantly in discourse about courtship and romance. In that society, the man is perceived to be the "eater" and the woman his "sweet food," as can be inferred from everyday expressions that mean, in translated form, "Does she taste sweet?" "She tastes sweet as sugar honey." Such a remarkable correspondence to the *love is a sweet taste* formula deployed by Ted suggests that this particular conceptual metaphor probably cuts across cultures.

Metaphor in Everyday Life

Conceptual metaphors surface not only in common discourse, but in nonverbal codes, rituals, and group behaviors as well. The metaphor *justice is blind*, for instance, crops up not only in conversations, but also in pictorial representations. This is why there are statues of blindfolded women inside or outside courtrooms to symbolize justice. The metaphorical expression *the scales of justice* is evident in the sculptures of scales near or inside justice buildings. Similarly, Ted's *love is a sweet taste* concept finds expression not only in discourse, but also in rituals of love-making. This is why sweets are given to a loved one at Valentine's Day, why matrimonial love is symbolized at a wedding ceremony by the eating of a cake, why lovers sweeten their breath with

candy before kissing, and so on. Any ritualistic display of *love* will depend on what concept people infer to be more representative of a specific situation. For example, at weddings the concept of *sweetness* would probably be seen to fit the situation, whereas that of *physical attraction* would most likely be considered pertinent during other kinds of courtship situations.

More often than not, conceptual metaphors are also traces to a culture's historical past. A common expression such as "He has fallen from grace" would have been recognized instantly in a previous era as referring to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Today we continue to use it with only a dim awareness (if any) of its Biblical origins. Expressions that portray life as a journey—"I'm still a long way from my goal," "There is no end in sight"—are similarly rooted in Biblical narrative where journeys are allusive to self-discovery. As the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye aptly pointed out, one cannot penetrate such expressions, and indeed most of Western literature or art, without having been exposed, directly or indirectly, to the original Biblical stories.²³ These are the source domains for many of the conceptual metaphors we use today for talking about and judging human actions, which bestow a kind of implicit metaphysical meaning and value to everyday life.

All *mythical* (from the Greek *mythos* "word," "speech," "tale of the gods") stories are, in effect, extended conceptual metaphors. These allow people to depict divine entities in terms of human images, with human bodily forms and emotions. It is extremely difficult to think of a divinity in any other way. In the Bible, for example, God is described as having physical characteristics and human emotions, but at the same time is understood to be a transcendent being.

The link to the past is also evident in proverbial language. Proverbs, like myths, are extended metaphors that provide sound practical advice.

You've got too many fires burning

(= advice to not do so many things at once)

Rome wasn't built in a day

(= advice to have patience)

Don't count your chickens before they're hatched

(= advice to be cautious)

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth

(= equal treatment is required in love and war)

Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise

(= this was Benjamin Franklin's adaptation of Aesop's proverb "The gods help them that help themselves")

Every culture has its proverbs, aphorisms, and sayings. These constitute a remarkable code of ethics and practical knowledge that anthropologists call “folk wisdom.” Indeed, the very concept of *wisdom* implies the ability to apply proverbial language insightfully to a situation. As the American writer Maya Angelou has put it, proverbs have “couched the collective wisdom of generations.” It is interesting to note that one of the most popular publications of the eighteenth century in America was an almanac, called *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, written and published by Benjamin Franklin (1706–90). Apparently, it became popular, in part, because it contained alluring proverbs that have since become household sayings in America. Franklin came to the idea of the almanac early in his career, when he was a printer and publisher in Philadelphia. He issued the almanac for every year from 1733 to 1758, writing under the name of Richard Saunders, an imaginary astronomer. Similar to other almanacs of its time, *Poor Richard’s* included such features as a horoscope, practical advice, jokes, poems, and weather predictions. At first, *Richard* had little wit or humor. However, as his character developed, he became a clever spokesman for Franklin’s ideas on thrift, duty, hard work, and simplicity. *Poor Richard’s Almanac* grew into one of the most popular and influential works printed in colonial America. Many of its sayings have become famous. Here are two of them:

A penny saved is a penny earned.
God helps those who help themselves.

The almanac greatly influenced American thought before and after the Revolutionary War of 1775–83. Franklin enlarged the almanac for the 1748 edition and called it *Poor Richard Improved*. In the preface to the final edition, he collected many of *Richard’s* proverbs on how to succeed in business and public affairs. The preface, called “The Way to Wealth,” was reprinted separately and was widely read in England and France, as well as in America.

The constant use of a proverb, a saying, or an aphorism leads to the formation of *clichés*—expressions that have become trite through over-usage. Phrases such as *handwriting on the wall*, *many are called, few are chosen*, and *an eye for an eye* are all proverbs that have become clichés. From Shakespeare we get the following clichés: *a pound of flesh*, *method to my madness*, and *witching hour*. Despite their apparent triteness, we continue to use them because we still sense that they provide wisdom. They enable common people to quote the Bible or Shakespeare, whether they mean to or not, and thus to give implicit authority to their statements. Orations and sermons, too, dispense their own

kind of advice and wisdom through metaphor. Rarely does a charismatic preacher not use metaphorical discourse in a persuasive way. The art of preaching lies in the ability to apply metaphorical concepts effectively to a topic—*sex is dirty, sin is punishable by fire*, and so on.

The use of metaphor extends to scientific reasoning. Science often involves things that cannot be seen, such as atoms, waves, gravitational forces, and magnetic fields. Therefore, scientists use their metaphorical know-how to get a look, so to speak, at this hidden matter. That is why waves are said to *undulate* through empty space as water waves ripple through a still pond; atoms to *leap* from one quantum state to another; electrons to *travel in circles* around an atomic nucleus; and so on. The physicist K. C. Cole has put it into perspective as follows:²⁴

The words we use are metaphors; they are models fashioned from familiar ingredients and nurtured with the help of fertile imaginations. “When a physicist says an electron is like a particle,” writes physics professor Douglas Giancoli, “he is making a metaphorical comparison like the poet who says love is like a rose.” In both images a concrete object, a rose or a particle, is used to illuminate an abstract idea, love or electron.

Poet and scientist alike use metaphor to extrapolate a suspected inner connection among things. Metaphors are slices of truth; they are evidence of the human ability to see the universe as a coherent organism. When a metaphor is accepted as fact, it enters human life, taking on an independent conceptual existence in the real world, and thus it can suggest ways in which to bring about changes in and to the world. Euclidean geometry, for instance, gave the world a certain kind of visual metaphorical structure for millennia—a world of relations among points, lines, circles, and so on. The structure was, however, changed to suit new ideas. This is precisely what happened when the mathematician Nikolai Lobachevski (1793–1856) imagined that Euclid’s parallel lines would “meet” in some context, such as at the poles of a globe, thus giving the visual world a different structure. We are now reaping the benefits of his metaphorical thought, since the geometries that have derived from it are the basis for a host of modern-day inventions and physical theories of the world.

Notes

1. Giambattista Vico, *The new science*, translated by Thomas G. Bergin and Max Fisch, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), par. 821.
2. *Ibid.*, par. 142.
3. *Ibid.*, par. 144.

4. Ibid., par. 1106.
5. Ibid., par. 1106.
6. Ibid., par. 1106.
7. Ibid., par. 1108.
8. I. A. Richards, *The philosophy of rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).
9. Solomon Asch, "On the use of metaphor in the description of persons." In *On Expressive Language*, edited by Heinz Werner, 86–94 (Worcester: Clark University Press, 1950).
10. W. Booth, "Metaphor as Rhetoric: The problem of evaluation." In *On Metaphor*, edited by S. Sacks, 47. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
11. Ellen Winner and Howard Gardner, "The comprehension of metaphor in brain-damaged patients," *Brain* 100 (1977): 717–29.
12. Howard Pollio, Jack M. Barlow, Harold J. Fine, and Marylin R. Pollio, *The poetics of growth: Figurative language in psychology, psychotherapy, and education* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977).
13. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
14. Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the word: Studies in the evolution of consciousness and culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 134.
15. George Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Mark Johnson, *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination and reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
16. Lakoff, *Women, fire, and dangerous things*, op. cit.
17. A panoramic survey of the major findings on metaphor can be found in Raymond W. Gibbs, *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and in Marcel Danesi, *Poetic logic: The role of metaphor in thought, language, and culture* (Madison: Atwood Publishing, 2004).
18. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 35–40.
19. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's edge: The theory and politics of irony* (London: Routledge, 1995).
20. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The way we think: Conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities* (New York: Basic, 2002).
21. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 49.
22. Alice Deignan, "Metaphors of desire." In *Language and Desire*, edited by Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom, 41 (London: Routledge, 1997). An in-depth treatment of love metaphors is the one by Zoltán Kövecses, *The Language of love: The semantics of passion in conversational English* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988).
23. Northrop Frye, *The great code: The Bible and literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1981).
24. K. C. Cole, *Sympathetic vibrations* (New York: Bantam, 1984).

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