

Elena Semino. *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. (xii, 247)

This text is an entry in the field of works derived from Conceptual Metaphor Theory. It begins with a definition of *metaphor* as the phenomenon by which we “talk, and potentially, think about something in term of something else” (1). This alteration of Aristotle’s conception appears motivated by a metaphor employed under the theory, that metaphoricity is actuated by “mapping across conceptual domains” (5), itself the result of a wholesale adoption of an extension of digital computing concepts and the terms that name them as a representation of human cognition. The body of this text applies CMT to a number of discourse spheres, literature (Ch 2), politics (Ch 3), science and education (Ch 4), other genres and discourses, such as advertising and illness (Ch 5), and studies involving corpora (Ch 6). Fundamental weaknesses in the approach are perpetuated in this work.

Much of what is discussed as metaphorical in recent literature in this tradition is in fact relexified, polysemous material. Speculation about metaphorical extension in prepositions (18) misses the point that prepositions are primarily grammatical (functional) words whose usage is determined wholly by convention; the instances cited, “*over* the last three days” and “*on* trade,” have long since become conventionalized. Likewise, what are called here “technical metaphors,” terms which “have acquired conventional senses that are specific to the target domain” (150), are, *by reason of having acquired* “conventional senses,” plain terms in their field, no matter how colorful they may appear to outsiders. Terms like *fenestrae* (< Lat. ‘windows’) ‘openings in capillaries through which oxygen and nutrients exit the blood vessel’, for example, may owe their existence to a certain perception of analogy, i.e., their originators may have been inspired by a certain similarity, but they are nonetheless terms.

Thus, attempting to establish metaphoricity by consulting a dictionary to determine the ‘basic’ meaning (11) is misguided. Even the latest edition of a dictionary is compiled looking backward at the usage patterns available to compilers in their databases. The problem is compounded in words like *progress* (14), whose ‘basic meaning’ is to be found in an earlier stage of a different language. This covers most of the literary and high culture vocabulary of English. These words are borrowed whole and acquired in subsequent generations unanalyzed, absent special school training in etymology research. This also applies to domestic words. Whatever extension occurred in *hap* when suffixed by *-y* to derive *happy* is utterly opaque to contemporary speakers, who do not recognize its etymological connection with *happen*. When we resort to textbooks and special dictionary entries to fathom out “etymological metaphors” (188), we are in fact engaged in historical lexicography. The study of words and the changes in their meanings as time passed and as they crossed language boundaries is no less fascinating therefore.

Calculating the frequency of terms deemed metaphorical in a corpus (24) therefore seems a pointless errand. The process of metaphorical extension, by which new terms come into existence by reason of their form acquiring new meanings, has long been recognized as the most productive in word creation. For example, the term *idea* can be traced to an old form of the third person singular ‘saw’ (ἰδεῖν) in Greek. Where do we stop finding such ‘metaphors’? The *dishes* we eat from are named from a term whose meaning was extended in Germanic. It is hard to conceive that our mother was making a metaphor when she told us to wash them after supper.

Seeking to categorize terms as conventionally or novelly metaphorical, on the basis of their being “readily perceived” as such by “ordinary” speakers (19), further obfuscates matters. This “‘ordinary’ language user” (ibid.) is no less idealized an abstraction than the “ideal speaker”

of the generative theorists. Indeed, the awareness of metaphoricity is a talent, one which is highly variable in both adults and children, as anyone who has studied – or taught – literature can attest. Any discussion of a literary text among upper division or graduate students well socialized to the conventional tropes of the various genres will demonstrate a highly developed sensitivity to shades of semantic possibilities borne of interest and a certain faculty and honed and tempered in the creative fire of the seminar room, in sharp contrast to the blank stares of kinesiology and child development students sitting idly through a discussion of tropes in Ezra Pound during their General Education literature survey course.

Closely related to this faculty for detecting potential tropes is a certain cleverness at sniffing out double entendres, as in the sample given (20):

Radio presenter: I have always wanted to pick up the piano myself.  
Caller: Not literally.

Of course, to make *pick up* masquerade as metaphorical (= learn < lift) we must ignore definite article *the* in the radio host's comment, which precludes the tropical reading (but also we must ask what features are mapped from the domain of *lifting* to the domain of *learning*). A distant uncle of mine enjoyed producing such remarks as, *did you get a haircut? – no, I got them all cut!*, in the presence of unsuspecting strangers and children. Most of us have the intuition that persons like my uncle or the radio caller above are rather atypical in their use of language, thus the novelty and the sensation of humor that justifies their practices. In any case, in the subject example, *pick up* has also meant 'learn, acquire' since before all of us were born.

The operation of the faculty of perceiving metaphors bears a significant influence in applying CMT. CMT, expressed in Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), borrows from other generative theories the postulate that conceptual metaphors are socially transmitted into the consciousness of individual speakers (i.e., deep structure), from whence surface

expressions of the conceptual metaphor are derived. This means that like Chomsky's Linguistic Competence, we cannot observe it, but only the productions which evidence its presence. This requires in the case of CMT an observer socialized in the theory and versed in its practice. Crucially, in the process of interpreting clusters of seemingly like 'metaphorical' items to construe the presence of a conceptual metaphor in deep structure, a process not unlike close reading in literary analysis is undertaken. But in this effort, anything goes, as it is the imagination of the theorist that is operational in constructing conceptual metaphor sets.

The practice of constructing metaphoricity on the part of theorists is evident in errors in glossing. The phrase to *have illness* is cited as a metaphorical use of *have* 'possess' (182). But this erroneously construes *have*, which here is clearly used with an attributive sense, as in *a dog has four legs* and *she has brown hair*, (which appears in fact to precede 'possess' cross linguistically). Contrasting individual metaphor construction is demonstrated in contradictory attributions, as when the author contradicts Lakoff and Johnson in accounting for *rich life* (195). If we are missing the glosses in basic semantic items and arguing over the locus of the source domain, we are missing the point that that the construction results from an interpretation that results from individual perception and imagination.

The literal-minded operation of "mapping across domains" that lie at the heart of this modular approach fails to recognize the specific reality of metaphorical extension that produces polysemous items when specific target features are selected and conventionalized for the new sense as speakers and hearers process them. Consider Chinese 道 *dao* (written with a head showing in a cart) 'path, route'; this extended to 'a passage way' and to 'travel'; by the Warring States Period it was used as 'doctrine, ideology' (Sun Zi, *Bing Fa*); These senses remain current. Further extension after the Tang Dynasty resulted in application as a classifier to 'courses in a

meal', 'cracks in a wall', and even 'doors' (when considered as 'passages'). This extension is not the result of a "mapping" into the new "domain" of all the features of the term, but the specific recruitment of (a) relevant feature(s) for the new term.

Similarly, mixed metaphors are a train wreck for CMT based interpretations. When "incompatible" metaphors (27) occur in speech, either or both are plainly not metaphorical; if the clash is not noticed, one or both items are taken as plain terms.

To her credit, the author finds "unfortunate" the generally dismissive attitude of CMT exponents, who describe the work of previous metaphor scholarship as "entirely misconceived" (9), perhaps another analogy with their generative predecessors, and she does assimilate sources from outside the CMT tradition.

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