

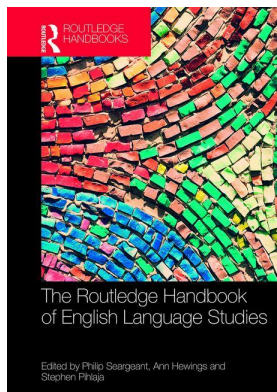
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### Metaphor studies and English

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# Metaphor studies and English

Zsófia Demjén

## Introduction

‘Metaphors are necessary and not just nice’, claimed Andrew Ortony as far back as 1975 (p. 45). Despite this claim, and many similar ones since, metaphor has arguably been a somewhat marginal topic in English language studies. This chapter puts it front and centre, highlighting some of the key contributions it can make to the field.

As a linguistic phenomenon, metaphor sits at the semantic level of language alongside lexis, though some also consider it a matter of thought. It has been the focus of scholarship for centuries in fields as diverse as rhetoric, philosophy, ethics, politics, philology, linguistics, literary and cultural criticism, psychology, and cognitive science. Its popular appeal was boosted in the 1980s with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) – a title testament to the centrality of the phenomenon – which continues to inspire especially cognitively-oriented research. Whatever their field, metaphor scholars generally agree that it is fundamental to understanding how language systems develop, and to how we organise and expand our knowledge about ourselves, our relationships, and our world (Cameron and Low 1999: xii). In this vein, the linguistic view of metaphor, which is the subject of this chapter, does not treat it as simply decorative, aesthetic, special, or indeed ‘nice’.

Consider the following excerpt from *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Kukil 2000: 185), where Plath, addressing herself as ‘you’, describes her feelings after having decided not to attend Harvard Summer School in order to have time to think, find out about herself and write:

*you are paralyzed, shocked, thrown into a nausea, a stasis. You are plunged so deep in your own very private little whirlpool of negativism that you can’t do more than force yourself into a rote*

(July 6, 1953) (underlining added)

The everyday view of metaphor might recognise some of the underlined words, e.g. ‘thrown’, ‘plunged’, ‘whirlpool’, perhaps ‘paralyzed’, as metaphors and might describe them in evaluative terms as (un)creative, revealing, apt, or stale. From a linguistic perspective,

however, all underlined words in this excerpt are instances of metaphor: they represent ways of talking, and potentially thinking, about one thing as if it was something else, where a similarity can be perceived between the two entities (Semino 2008). Metaphor is seen as a pervasive and ordinary part of all language use, and while specific instances can be decorative, aesthetic, and special, they are studied less for the purposes of evaluation or appreciation, and more for developing our understanding of what meanings they convey, how they do so, why they are used, and what the consequences of their use might be for different discourse participants. There are a number of valuable insights into language that can be gained from such a view of metaphor and I will illustrate some of these with reference to the excerpt above. (For a fuller discussion of the excerpt itself see Demjén 2015.)

First, the underlined words in the excerpt illustrate that subjective, personal, intangible, or abstract experiences, such as emotions, are often described using metaphors, frequently with several in combination. Metaphors convey meanings vividly and concisely and have been described as bridging the gap between the fluidity and continuity of life, and the discreteness of language as a set of symbols used to represent it (Ortony 1975). As a result, metaphors are often used as explanatory tools, in education for example. A second and related insight is that metaphors evaluate and frame the topics they describe in particular ways, highlighting some aspects, while backgrounding others (e.g. Semino et al. 2016). The metaphors in the excerpt above, for example, highlight the negativity and uncontrollability of certain emotions, while backgrounding their potentially fleeting and changeable nature. Attitudes towards and reasoning about the topic described are affected by such framings (Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011) and for this reason, metaphor is frequently used as a persuasive tool in public and political communications, among others.

A third insight is related to the idea that some metaphors ‘feel’ more metaphorical than others. ‘Thrown’ and ‘plunged’ are easily identified as talking about the experiencing of emotions as if it was the physical, involuntary, and potentially violent movement of one’s body from one place to another. A similarity can be perceived between these two in the sense that they are both unpleasant and not within one’s control. Metaphoricity is arguably less obvious in the case of the underlined prepositions, with expressions like ‘force’ and ‘shocked’ sitting somewhere in between the two extremes. On the one hand, this illustrates that there is a cline of metaphoricity, ranging from non-metaphorical, through conventional, to novel expressions. On the other hand, this range is also to a certain extent indicative of a process of semantic change in the English language, where new expressions enter the lexicon as metaphors, become conventionalised and eventually lose their metaphoricity (Sweetser 1990). ‘Rote’ in the excerpt above could be seen as an example of a word that has lost its metaphoricity in current English usage (though its origins are uncertain according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED]).

Metaphor studies involves a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as applications in contexts as diverse as second language learning, advertising, politics, psychiatry, and neuroscience. A single handbook chapter cannot aim to do justice to all of these, so the majority of this chapter will be devoted to the aforementioned insights, which are particularly relevant to English language studies. The next section begins with a more detailed discussion of the concept of metaphor as a feature of language and thought. I then outline one well-established method for the systematic identification of metaphor in language before moving on to a discussion of why metaphor is worth considering in the context of English language studies. I focus specifically on the insights it can contribute to our understanding of language change, the success or failure of explanations in education, and the role of framing (including persuasion) in public health and political communications. Finally, I highlight key debates relevant to these areas and offer reflections on the future directions of metaphor studies.

## Metaphor in language and thought

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to the study of metaphor in linguistics: those that focus on metaphor as primarily a matter of language (discourse-based approaches) and those that see it primarily as a matter of thought (cognitive approaches). The former has a long-standing tradition, starting with Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* (although Aristotle's work does not limit itself to language; see Mahon 1999), continuing with that of Locke, Vico, and Kant (see Jäkel 1999), and more recently seen in the work of scholars such as Kittay (1987) Reisigl (2006) and Ricoeur (2003 [1975]). Discourse approaches see metaphor as consisting of a figuratively-used word or expression (vehicle), which describes a concept or idea (topic) in terms of similarity. For example, 'whirlpool' in the excerpt above can be seen as the vehicle describing negative emotion (topic) as something that is difficult to get out of. In this way, metaphor helps to construct, represent and transform reality (Reisigl 2006). It is understood that metaphor is not rare – even Aristotle, although this is often ignored or misrepresented, noted the ubiquity of metaphor in conversation and writing (Mahon 1999) – and that it is one of a number of tropes that 'leap' from one semantic sphere to another (Reisigl 2006), allowing us to better understand previously obscure topics. This makes it particularly useful as a tool of explanation and persuasion, especially in education (Cameron 2003) and politics (Musolf 2006; Reisigl 2006).

This focus on language became sidelined, to some extent, in the 1980s with the publication of Ortony's edited collection *Metaphor and Thought* (Ortony 1979, 2nd edition in 1993) and Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 2nd edition 2003). These volumes were instrumental in the paradigm shift that turned from viewing metaphor as a tool of language to a tool of thought, epitomised by the influential Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The central tenet of CMT is that human thought and understanding relies on systematic sets of correspondences between so-called 'source' and 'target' domains (areas of meaning, or 'semantic sphere'). Source domains are usually concrete or physical and, so the theory goes, permit us to understand the more abstract target domain that they are used to describe. CMT goes so far as to say that only a few basic concrete concepts, such as physical location, motion in space or spatial orientation, are understood in a literal way (Grady 1997). We understand these literally, because we learn about them through the sensorimotor experiences of our bodies ('embodiment') (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989). Other, more abstract concepts can only be understood in terms of these basic literal categories. For example, 'life' is abstract, so in order to be able to make sense of it, we have to think about it in terms of something more concrete. Progress in life is understood as motion forwards in space, or even more specifically as 'a journey': *I've reached a crossroads in my life; she overcame huge obstacles on her road to success*. Within CMT, these two examples are seen as linguistic realisations of the conventional conceptual metaphor (denoted by small capitals) LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which we think by.

CMT had, and still has, intuitive appeal, but it has also been criticised, often for being less than specific about methodology. Despite relying on linguistic examples as evidence for conceptual metaphors, it did not make it clear how exactly metaphor was identified in language, nor how many linguistic examples were required to claim the existence of a conceptual metaphor (see for example Deignan 2005). In addition, early CMT scholars did not investigate or consider important variation in the form and discourse function of metaphor, depending on medium, register, or genre, and treated the English language not only as a homogeneous whole, but as representative (at least initially) of other languages.

Partly as a result of these shortcomings, there has been a resurgence of interest in metaphor in language and discourse. This does not mean that scholarship has turned away from the idea

of metaphor as a characteristic of thought, but that a substantial proportion of recent work has ‘taken discourse data seriously’ (Zinken and Musolff 2009) and been more careful with asserting the existence of specific conceptual metaphors and the evidence used to support these (e.g. Cameron et al. 2010; Deignan 2005). This refocusing has enabled the investigation of underlying attitudes and ideologies embedded in metaphorical communication and the consequences this might have. It has led to new insights into language change and second/foreign language learning. It has illuminated some of the ways and circumstances in which metaphors can be helpful or harmful, including ways in which it contributes to or hinders our understanding of new ideas. Finally, the renewed focus on metaphor in language has also led to the development of some reliable methods of metaphor identification, and it is to one of these that I now turn.

## Finding metaphor

For a claim such as ‘all underlined words in the excerpt above are metaphors’ to stand, it needs to be underpinned by a reliable and explicit method for metaphor identification, especially when it comes to the less clear-cut examples such as ‘into’ and ‘force’. To respond to this need, a group of ten international metaphor scholars, from different disciplines, got together in the early 2000s and over several years developed an explicit, reliable, and flexible method for identifying metaphorically used words in language. This method is now known as the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group 2007), more recently expanded into MIPVU (‘VU’ stands for ‘Vrije Universiteit’, where the group was based) (Steen et al. 2010). MIP goes as follows (adapted from Pragglejaz Group 2007: 3):

- 1 Read the entire text/discourse to establish a general understanding of its meaning.
- 2 Decide on what will count as a lexical unit in the text/discourse (i.e. will it always be the word, or will there be exceptions such as phrasal verbs and compound nouns?).
- 3
  - a For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context (i.e. how does it apply to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text?).
  - b For each lexical unit, determine (with reference to a reliable, preferably corpus-based, dictionary) if it has a more basic contemporary/current meaning. Basic meanings tend to be more concrete; related to bodily action; more precise (as opposed to vague); historically older.
  - c If the lexical unit has a more basic current/contemporary meaning, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.
- 4 If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical.

Taking ‘thrown’ from the initial excerpt, the procedure would go as follows:

- 1 reading the extended co-text of the example to understand what is actually being talked about (e.g. feelings about having a lot of time to think).
- 2 parsing the text to determine whether ‘thrown’ is one lexical unit and not part of a phrasal verb, for example.
- 3
  - a establishing that in context the lexical unit refers to something like ‘experiencing an emotion suddenly and unexpectedly’

- b establishing that there is a more basic meaning; one that is more physical: ‘to use force to move someone or something’ or ‘to send an object through the air’ (Macmillan Dictionary 2009–2016)
  - c deciding that 3a and 3b contrast, but can be understood in comparison to each other
- 4 marking ‘thrown’ as metaphorical.

This same procedure can also capture similes (or what Steen et al. (2010) describe as ‘direct metaphor’), which are different only in that they signal comparison explicitly through ‘like’, ‘as’, ‘as if’, etc.

Aside from making metaphor analysis more systematic, a key contribution of MIP is its insistence on making any methodological decisions explicit. One has to state what counts as a lexical unit, which dictionary is used to establish basic meanings, and what if anything is to be excluded from consideration. For example, scholars sometimes decide to exclude closed-class (grammatical) words, such as the preposition ‘into’ in the initial excerpt, and/or highly delexicalised verbs (Hopper and Traugott 2003) such as *have*, *do*, *give*, *take*, *make*, *get*, *put*, and *like*, because basic meanings can be particularly difficult to establish when semantics have been diluted.

Once individual metaphors have been identified, the next step is to examine how metaphors pattern in texts, as robust interpretations of metaphor use rely on systematic patterns rather than individual examples. Depending on one’s interests, this might involve looking at metaphor patterns or frequencies in source and target domains (or vehicles and topics), in parts of speech (Krennmayr 2014), within and across texts or genres (Deignan et al. 2013; Dorst 2015), and in patterns of novelty/creativity versus conventionality (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Semino 2008), among others. The reliable and replicable method of identification also enables scholars who wish to hypothesise about metaphor in thought to do so in a grounded manner, for example by referring to ‘systematic metaphors’ instead (Cameron et al. 2010). These denote persistent patterns of vehicles and topics in a particular discourse without claiming they have cognitive reality. Instead, a systematic metaphor simply indicates that there may be a cognitive basis for the patterns.

At this point some might wonder whether so much effort will actually pay off in terms of new insights gained. In the next section, I discuss findings of relevance to English language studies demonstrating why, I would argue, the answer is yes.

## **Current critical issues and topics of relevance for English language studies**

### *Changes in meanings*

As indicated previously, metaphor contributes to our understanding of the changes and developments in the meanings of words. Along with ‘broadening’ and ‘narrowing’, metaphor is one of the most commonly recognised types of lexical semantic change mechanisms (Urban 2014) and one that often helps us make sense of polysemy. It explains how different co-existing meanings of words might be related, and how old meanings of words are related to new ones (Sweetser 1990). Some have even suggested that metaphor accounts for around half of all meaning extensions in the lexical development of a language (Dirven 1985).

A simple example of polysemy through ‘metaphorisation’ (Traugott 2006) is the adjective *sunny*. Based on citations in the *OED*, which provides the dates for the first recorded examples

of individual meanings, Anderson (2017) shows that the word initially meant ‘characterized by or full of sunshine’. This meaning was recorded as early as 1300 and is still current today. An equally current meaning (which is why ‘sunny’ is polysemous), is ‘bright, cheerful, joyous’, which was first recorded in 1616. As this is a metaphorical sense, it is argued that metaphorisation has led to a change in meaning, resulting in polysemy. A similar process can be observed in some instances of semantic shift, i.e. when an old meaning disappears from usage and is replaced by a new meaning.

In addition, ‘sunny’ is arguably just one example of a broader pattern of metaphorisation, or metaphorical extension. Looking at the metaphorical meaning of sunny as ‘bright, cheerful, joyous’ again, it becomes clear that within that definition ‘bright’ is another polysemous word with a very similar trajectory. Its first sense in the *OED* is ‘Shining; emitting, reflecting, or pervaded by much light’ first recorded around 1000. Its figurative meaning ‘lit up with happiness, gladness, or hope. Also, hopeful, encouraging, cheering’ dates from 1751. The literal senses of ‘sunny’ and ‘bright’ are related, as are their metaphorical senses; they seem to have developed in the same way. And these are not the only two examples: ‘beam’, ‘sparkling’, and ‘light up’ have all developed new meanings via the same metaphorical extension (Anderson 2017). With recourse to CMT, this pattern can be explained as being motivated by the conceptual metaphor – a metaphorical way of thinking – HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (*ibid.*). We think about the abstract concept of happiness (target domain) in terms of the more concrete, physical experience of light. This results in multiple lexical items related to the semantic category of light (source domain), becoming used to metaphorically describe happiness, cheerfulness, excitement, and the like. The metaphoric extension from visual light to happiness can be seen as related to the broader pattern of understanding internal mental-affective processes in terms of external physical processes (e.g. the verb ‘feel’ denoting both haptic perception and emotion; the verbs ‘see’ and ‘grasp’ to mean ‘understand’) (Sweetser 1990).

A recent relevant study is the ‘Mapping Metaphor with the *Historical Thesaurus*’ project at Glasgow University (<http://mappingmetaphor.arts.gla.ac.uk/>), which is developing an overview of metaphorical connections made by speakers and writers of English over the entire history of the language. By studying records in the Historical Thesaurus, the team are able to track how words, from the domain of light for example, are used over time to describe other domains such as intelligence, knowledge, or indeed happiness. In this way, they can begin to see – literally, as the project is developing visualisations of its results – innovations in language motivated by metaphorical thinking at particular points in history in relation to different areas of experience. (For more, see Anderson et al. 2016.)

### *Language learning and education*

Another broad area where investigating metaphor can provide insights is education. There are two main strands of research here: studies of how metaphor helps or hinders explanations of new ideas in education generally and studies related to how metaphor might be involved or used in the learning/teaching of a language such as English. (Low’s (1988) seminal paper is a useful starting point on the latter.)

In the first strand, studies have investigated the role metaphor plays in first language or monolingual educational contexts (see for example Cameron (2003) and scholars in Aubusson et al. (2006)). Broadly speaking, in these contexts metaphor is often used to develop or ‘constitute’ new theories and ideas, fill terminological gaps, and to explain complex notions in understandable ways. These functions are, of course, related to the characteristics of metaphor outlined in the introduction to this chapter, and are also deployed in public communication – effectively

public education – about complex, often scientific subjects such as climate change (e.g. Nerlich and Jaspal 2013). Metaphorical nouns (e.g. ‘pump’ for the human heart) can be particularly productive for constitutive or explanatory purposes (Cameron 2003), but metaphors can also be used to manage and mediate the activity of the classroom and the learning of the students (e.g. via instructions to ‘go’ or ‘skip over’ something), including the mitigation of face threats in feedback (Cameron 2003). An important finding to emerge from this body of research is that, while metaphors tend to be deployed for the purposes of explanation and elucidation, the specific ways in which this is done can sometimes have the opposite effect. For example, when Cameron (2003) explored 9-11 year-old students’ understandings of the metaphors their teachers and textbooks used, she found that metaphorically used verbs combined with anaphoric reference could lead to misunderstandings. In ‘The Earth is kept warm by the Sun’s heat, and the atmosphere traps some of this heat so that it doesn’t escape into space’ the underlined anaphoric reference ‘it’ was mistaken as referring to ‘the atmosphere’ rather than ‘heat’, resulting in the misunderstanding of the topic of the metaphor ‘escape’. In this case, Cameron (2003) argues, knowledge about the topic that the metaphor was meant to elucidate was required to correctly interpret the metaphor in the first place. Confusion as a result of metaphorical explanations in English is not just a feature of primary and secondary education, but also of higher education, where it can disproportionately affect international audiences. Littlemore (2001, 2003) and Littlemore et al. (2011), for example, found that international students sometime lacked the ‘shared’ linguistic and cultural knowledge to interpret lecturers’ metaphors correctly.

The second strand of metaphor and education research, focusing on language teaching and learning, has also shown that particular metaphorical uses of English words can cause difficulties. For example, difficulties with comprehension can be related to the form of a metaphor. Picken (2005) found that ‘invisible’ metaphors, i.e. ones that were not signalled (e.g. by mentioning the topic alongside the vehicle; see also ‘key debates’ section below), were considerably more likely to be misinterpreted by Japanese learners of English than ‘explicit’ metaphors. This suggests that more subtle, unsignalled metaphors could require extra attention in the classroom. Metaphorically used words that are polysemous through metaphorical extension can also be problematic, especially if the various meanings of the equivalent word in the learner’s first language are not the same as in the target language. This is because language learners rely on knowledge of patterns in their first language to work out meanings in the target language (MacArthur and Littlemore 2008). MacArthur (2017) gives the example of the verb ‘strike’: in its literal sense, this verb is roughly equivalent to the verb *golpear* in Spanish. However, its metaphorical use in English describing a sudden onset of an idea or a condition (‘Louise was struck down with leukaemia’ or ‘another possibility that strikes me’), does not exist for the Spanish *golpear*. This means that in addition to learning the literal sense of ‘strike’, Spanish-speaking learners of English will have to be taught its possibilities for metaphorical extension, including any indirect evaluative meaning associated with it.

A further insight relevant to language teaching is evidence suggesting that if learners of English are provided with an explanation of how such figurative meanings of words are motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors, they are able to then generalise this information to new lexical items motivated in the same way (Boers 2000; Kövecses and Szabó 1996). This was shown specifically for phrasal verbs such as ‘show up’ and verbs of motion such as ‘plunge’. At least in the short run, explanations of metaphorical motivation also facilitate recall by making these meanings more memorable. As metaphorical competence can contribute to grammatical, textual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (Littlemore and Low 2006) these effects are important for language teachers to consider.



### *Framing and persuasion*

The final body of work relates not to what metaphor can contribute to our understanding of language and learning, but to what it can contribute to our understanding of language use and its relationship with reasoning and persuasion. I will focus on two contexts in particular: healthcare and political communication. There are several functions of metaphor at play here and they can be gathered under the umbrella function of ‘framing’. As outlined in the introduction, metaphors frame or position topics in particular ways, highlighting some aspects while backgrounding others. This generates expectations and inferences in communication and subsequent action (Entman 1993).

A much discussed example in this context is the use of ‘battle’ or ‘violence’ metaphors in the context of cancer. Sontag (1979) was among the first to critique the use of metaphor which manifests in expressions such as ‘he finally lost his brave battle with cancer’ or ‘my doctor recognised I was a born fighter’, and the topic has been the subject of intense debate since (Semino et al. 2017). The argument goes that the battle metaphor expressed in these examples implies a particular relationship between the person and the disease (adversarial), and therefore reflects and reinforces a way of conceiving of and experiencing the illness, which can have a negative impact on the individual’s sense of self. For example, patients might see themselves as losers if they do not get better, or as cowards if they refuse further treatment. The evaluative potential of metaphor (Deignan 2010) and its ability to connect with emotions is linked with this ability to frame topics (Ritchie 2013). This in itself is already an important insight. Because metaphor can be seen as not just a feature of language, but also of thought, even single instances of a metaphor can influence how we reason about and react to particular topics and issues. This has very tangible consequences in the context of politics.

In an experimental study, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), for example, found that metaphor can have a powerful influence over how people think social problems like crime should be solved. They presented two groups of university students with different versions of a media crime report. In one case, crime was described in terms of a virus and in the other, in terms of a beast:

Crime is a {wild beast preying on/virus infecting} the city of Addison. The crime rate in the once peaceful city has steadily increased over the past three years. In fact, these days it seems that crime is {lurking in/plaguing} every neighborhood. In 2004, 46,177 crimes were reported compared to more than 55,000 reported in 2007. The rise in violent crime is particularly alarming. In 2004, there were 330 murders in the city, in 2007, there were over 500.

(Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011: 3)

When increase in crime was described as the effect of a ‘virus’, participants tended to react and reason within the same biological or organic framing and to propose ‘investigating the root causes’. On the other hand, when increased crime was described in terms of a ‘beast’, they preferred capturing and jailing criminals. Importantly, this effect on reasoning was covert: the research participants did not recognise metaphors as influential in their decisions and argued instead that they had reached their conclusions based on other (often numerical) information. Similar effects of metaphor have been studied in the context of discussions of immigration (Musolff 2015) and the role of the European Union (Musolff 2006). The strategic choice of metaphor can therefore be seen as a crucial tool of persuasion, able to create changes in people’s reasoning – undetected.

So far, this discussion has focused on the more cognitive arguments around framing. Returning now to the topic of cancer, there is also additional insight to be gained from taking a discourse approach to the framing potential of metaphor. While it is certainly the case that violence-related metaphors can frame the experience of cancer in a way that is detrimental to people with the illness, Semino et al. (2017) also noted the opposite effect depending on the specific lexical manifestation of the metaphor, who was using it and when (see also Musolff (2015) for a similar line of argument in relation to metaphors of immigration). The metaphorical expression ‘fighter’ for instance, as used by cancer patients (e.g. ‘my doctor recognised I was a born fighter’ above), was exclusively used in ‘empowering’ ways. It implied a sense of control over the disease, and that the patient derived a positive sense of self from this positioning. It is therefore important that framing be considered as an effect of metaphor at both the conceptual and discourse linguistic levels (Semino et al. 2016).

### Key debates

Despite the fact that metaphor studies as a field is not new and despite the numerous insights it can contribute to our understanding of language, ongoing debates and unresolved issues remain. One debate I have already hinted at above is around the good or harm that specific metaphors and metaphorical framings can do in different contexts. Here I restrict myself to two others: the status of metaphor versus other tropes and problems with delineating semantic fields.

While the definition of metaphor as ‘talking, and potentially thinking, about one thing as if it was something else’ is widely used, some would argue that it is not unique to metaphor but can capture other tropes as well. Simile, hyperbole, analogy, allegory, metonymy, synecdoche, etc. are all terms used to describe some form of meaning transfer: some are within semantic domains, some across; some can be in the form of single words, some cannot; some are more likely to be creative than others. Different traditions find different distinctions more or less important. Here I briefly consider simile and metonymy.

Similes are generally seen as ‘an explicit statement of comparison between two different things, conveyed through expressions such as ‘like’, ‘as if’ and so on’ (Semino 2008: 16), while metaphor is more of an implicit comparison. Steen et al. (2010) go so far as to call similes ‘direct metaphors’. Yet the distinction can matter. There is evidence to suggest that when a figurative comparison is novel, it might be understood more quickly in the form of a simile than metaphor (Gentner and Bowdle 2008), except when the comparison is particularly apt (Haught 2013). This topic has also been debated via the concept of ‘signalling’ (e.g. Krennmayr et al. 2014). Differences in metaphor form, in terms of the presence or absence of signalling devices, can have an impact on the recall of particular metaphorical framing. Krennmayr et al. (2014) found that explicitly signalled figurative expressions, such as similes, which signal their metaphoricality via ‘like’, ‘as if’, etc., are more likely to be recalled. This result has bearings on metaphor’s role in influencing reasoning, discussed in the previous section.

The distinction between metaphor and metonymy can also be important. Metonymy is similar to metaphor, but the meaning transfer remains within a semantic domain; in metonymy, the relationship between a vehicle and its target is one of association rather than similarity (Littlemore 2015). For example, a car could be described metonymically as a ‘set of wheels’, because wheels are associated with cars. But the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is difficult to maintain: just as there is a cline of metaphoricality ranging from non-metaphorical to novel metaphor, there seems to be a cline between metonymy and metaphor (Barnden 2010). Deignan (2005), for example, suggests that many metaphors which have the human body as their basis are based in metonymy. ‘To get back on one’s feet’, when used to

denote recovery from illness, describes recovery in terms of a physical manifestation of itself. Ill or infirm people are often weak and have to lie down, but once they regain their strength, they can stand on their feet again. Despite this continuum, the differences can have consequences. Littlemore (2015), for example, suggests that metonymy actually provides more subtle ways of communicating nuance and evaluation than metaphor – a distinction that can be important when the goal is to persuade ‘gently’.

Another reason that the line between metaphor and metonymy can be difficult to draw, and this is, in fact, a broader issue in metaphor research, is that the definitions rely on being able to identify the boundaries of semantic fields or domains. Yet the boundaries between semantic domains are not fixed or clear-cut, but rather fuzzy at best (Barnden 2010). For example, it is difficult to say exactly where the boundary is between the semantic domain of ‘sports’ and that of ‘warfare’ (they also arguably share a lot of content). This has the potential to create, to date unresolved, problems. Even the MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007) above relies to some extent on being able to identify semantic boundaries. Claiming that the contextual meaning of a lexical item is different enough from the basic meaning to amount to metaphor requires the assumption of dividing lines between areas of meaning. This becomes even more problematic when dealing with diachronic data to investigate language change. Semantic domain boundaries are not only difficult to draw at a particular point in time; diachronic studies additionally need to take into account the fact that they are likely to shift over time (Anderson 2017).

### Future directions

Perhaps some of these debates will be resolved or become irrelevant with future research. There are a number of promising studies ongoing from various theoretical positions. The resurgence of discourse-based approaches, often drawing on evidence from large corpora, is likely to continue contributing practical as well as theoretical insights into metaphor and its role in language and communication. The recognition of the need for robust definitions and methods in metaphor research will likely do the same. However, perhaps the answers will arise not in the context of individual paradigms, methods or theoretical orientations, but from a perspective that has the potential to combine and reconcile insights from many. In this vein, one of the most exciting recent and ongoing developments is the application of dynamic systems theory to the study of communication generally and to the study of metaphor more specifically. Dynamic systems theory developed in the physical sciences (e.g. Holland 1995) to describe how complicated, multivariable systems coordinate and self-organise into coherent, functioning entities. In relation to metaphor, the idea of a dynamic system is evoked when trying to understand and account for the complexity of variation, patterns and relationships in the ways in which metaphor use develops and adapts in communication (e.g. Cameron and Maslen 2010; Gibbs and Cameron 2008). Gibbs and Cameron (2008) argue that metaphor ‘performance’ in interaction is influenced by a multitude of variables, including:

- Enduring metaphorical concepts, including conventional conceptual metaphors;
- Previously understood metaphorical utterances, i.e. what has been said or written before;
- Body movements and gesture;
- Gender and occupation – which may be generalisable to ‘who we are in the world’;
- The negotiation of intimacy and social distance between interlocutors;
- Conventional talk in specific socio-cultural groups (cf. Deignan et al.’s 2013 ‘discourse communities’);
- Specific language and culture.

But the objective of this approach in metaphor studies, at least for now, is to recognise and begin to take account of the fact that metaphor use is always and continually shaped by a potentially infinite number of factors, rather than to list all the possible factors that influence metaphor use. More importantly, because it was designed to cope with the idea of an indefinite number of variables, the dynamic systems approach is able to integrate into a coherent whole multiple theoretical views of metaphor, including cognitive approaches with discourse-based approaches (Gibbs 2011, 2017). In fact, this approach might also finally be able to fully integrate insights gained from studies of multimodal metaphor, such as visual images (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009) and gesture (Cienki and Müller 2008).

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the key insights that a study of metaphor can contribute to the field of English language studies. I focused on its role in explaining polysemy and language change, in helping or hindering the learning of language and the understanding of new concepts, and on its potential to frame topics in particular ways, thereby influencing reasoning. I also provided an overview of an established method of metaphor identification which provides studies with the systematicity and reliability needed to ensure that metaphor is understood as ‘necessary and not just nice’.

## Further reading

- Dancygier, B. and E. Sweetser (2014) *Figurative Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press. An up-to-date, accessible, yet thorough introduction to figurative language in general, and metaphor specifically. The authors cover various discourse and cognitive approaches.
- Semino, E. (2008) *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A detailed discussion of metaphor use in different contexts. It covers patterning, variation and functions of metaphor in literature, politics, science, education, and other genres.
- Cameron, L. and R. Maslen (eds) (2010) *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*. London: Equinox. A collection of chapters dedicated to the methods of analysis in studying metaphor. It includes discussions of metaphor identification, categorisation, and labelling, as well as the use of computer-assisted methods.
- Semino, E. and Z. Demjén (eds) (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. Abingdon: Routledge. A comprehensive collection of chapters covering formal and functional variation in metaphor across genres and contexts, metaphor in cognitive development and impairment, and applications and interventions using metaphor in various contexts, in addition to methodologies and theoretical underpinnings.

## Related topics

- The historical study of English
- Persuasive language.

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