Three kinds of metaphor-in-language
and how we can use them to synthesize theories of metaphor

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This paper argues that there are three distinct kinds of metaphor-in-language which differ in the source of their metaphoric meaning. Existing theories of metaphor within cognitive linguistics can be synthesized by limiting their scope to a certain kind of metaphor-in-language.

First, some metaphoric utterances have a direct and stable metaphoric meaning but others have a purely inferential meaning that varies according to interpreter (see discussion in Dunn, 2013a). These inferential metaphors, as in (1) and (2) below, I will call interpretive metaphors.

> (1) Christ was a chronometer.
> (2) Jack is a real lion.

Second, some direct-meaning metaphoric utterances are based on a conceptual source-target mapping. These direct-meaning metaphors, as in (3) and (4) below, I will call source-target metaphors.

> (3) That idea went out of style years ago.
> (4) Marxism is currently fashionable in western Europe.

A third group exists, however, one not previously described: direct-meaning metaphoric utterances which do not have a source-target mapping. These previously undescribed metaphors, as in (5) and (6) below, I will call modulated metaphors because the metaphoric elements in the utterance modulate the meaning of the other elements of the utterance so that the utterance as a whole has a stable metaphoric meaning (cf. Dunn, 2011). The modulated elements of the utterance cannot be called a target, however, nor can the modulating elements be called a source.

> (5) China has chased a trade agreement with the European Union.
> (6) A lady on high heels clacked along, the type my mother says invests all of her brainpower in her looks.

These three kinds of metaphor-in-language differ in where the metaphoric meaning comes from. The distinction between these kinds of metaphor is important because multiple theories exist which make conflicting claims about metaphor. This paper argues that most of these conflicts can be resolved by limiting the scope or purview of the different theories: each adequately describes a different kind of metaphor-in-language.

First, inferential theories apply to interpretive metaphors. Second, conceptual theories apply to source-target metaphors. Third, modulated metaphors can be integrated within a cognitive grammar-based approach to meaning-in-language. Two things set this paper apart from previous synthesis attempts: first, it does not attempt to provide a single universal explanation for metaphor-in-language; second, the three kinds of metaphor-in-language can be distinguished using their linguistic properties (for example, using computational metaphor identification systems; Dunn, 2013b).

Synthesizing theories of metaphor, in this case by limiting their scope, is an important undertaking at this stage in cognitive linguistics. The exploratory stage is finished and we can now begin to synthesize the findings, both from inside and from outside of the cognitive linguistics paradigm. This paper works toward that goal by showing how we can develop a theory of metaphoric meaning that describes all metaphoric expressions without losing the insights provided by any particular approach.

References

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