

METAPHORS FOR MARRIAGE IN OUR CULTURE

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Lakoff and Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), frequently allude to metaphors "in our culture." This paper explores the way in which culture can be said to constrain metaphorical thinking in one domain, that of American marriage. It undertakes systematic analysis of a sample of metaphors used by 22 American interviewees, spouses in 11 marriages, over an average of 15-16 hour-long interviews per individual. Superficially, the particular metaphorical expressions used by a given individual would seem to vary widely. But these expressions can be shown to cluster around one or another of a small number of underlying metaphorical models to which that individual consistently returns. Thus a husband who conceptualizes his marriage as BUILDING A DURABLE PRODUCT is able to express this underlying metaphorical model in terms of a number of different concrete products or general types of products, sometimes switching from product to product in a single utterance: a metal in "we forged a lifetime proposition," an unspecified construction of the sort one might build in one's home workshop in "marriage is a do-it-yourself project," something capable of structural improvement in "our marriage was strengthened," an edifice in "we made that the cornerstone," once again an edifice and then something made out of a malleable material, perhaps clay, in "they had a basic solid foundation in their marriages that could be shaped into something good," and something like a car built out of cannibalized parts, which then takes on the properties of a chemical such as epoxy glue in "we have both looked into the other person and found their best parts and used these parts to make the relationship gel." Another husband who conceptualizes marriage as TRAVEL sometimes speaks of the marriage as a train or trolley capable of "getting off the track," other times as foot travel in "he's running the same path I was before I got married." and "If I weren't married I'd be running down the same line," and still elsewhere as some kind of maneuverable vehicle in "I just observe others' marriages and try to run mine down the middle."

Moreover, analysis reveals that the vast majority of these stable metaphorical models themselves fall into two broad classes: metaphors of marriage as some kind of effortful activity--e.g., WORK, BUILDING A DURABLE PRODUCT, A QUEST, AN INVESTMENT, GROWTH, A STRUGGLE, A JOURNEY, TRAVEL --or marriage as some kind of dual relationship--e.g., A PARTNERSHIP, TWO PATHS CROSSING, MUTUAL PARTNERING, BEING A UNITED FRONT, BEING A PAIR, BEING ONE PERSON, BEING A COUPLE, A SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP. Thus the superficially variable metaphors which interviewees employ can be seen to be highly constrained. What constrains them is apparently some kind of (still deeper) underlying folk theory about the nature of the marital relationship, which says that such an enduring attachment between two people takes effort to achieve or insure.

Individuals are free to conceptualize their marriages in terms of any kind of experience drawn from either or both of the two classes, dual relationship and effortful activity. They may also choose to foreground metaphor from one of these to the neglect of the other--understanding their marriage primarily or entirely in terms of the

nature of the relationship they have, or alternatively, in terms of the effort involved in sustaining that relationship. However, given individuals are very likely to employ metaphorical models of both classes. When this is done, the metaphorical model selected from the class of effortful activities matches an entailment of the metaphorical model which characterizes the nature of the relationship. The mapping is one of goal implementation: that is, given some entailment of the relationship conveyed in one metaphorical model, how can such an entailment plausibly be implemented? Thus, for example, the husband with the model of marriage as BUILDING A DURABLE PRODUCT (an effortful activity) is implementing, in this enterprise, the goal of making a permanent marriage. Permanence is entailed by BEING A COUPLE (a dual relationship), a metaphorical model central in his thinking about the nature of his marriage and others he knows (Quinn 1981). For this husband, being a couple entails being permanently coupled together, hence "durably built."

The husband who regards marriage as TRAVEL (an effortful activity) means, by keeping his marriage on the track and running it down the middle, that he regulates the proportion of time he and his wife spend together and apart, or as he puts it, the proportion of time their "paths run together" and "run apart." His metaphorical model for their marital relationship is one of TWO PATHS CROSSING (a dual relationship). Achieving a balance between "crossed" time and separate time, which he views as the central entailment of marriage as TWO PATHS CROSSING, he then conceptualizes in terms of the necessity to stay on the path, keep on the track, and steer a correct course.

Still another husband views his marriage as a SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP (a dual relationship) in which spouses must be "pretty clear where each of us are" in some kind of uncharted territory, and "try to get a good sense of where we are" or else "we might satellite far enough away so we're not sure what's in between us" in what appears to be outer space. If two people are constantly shifting position vis-a-vis one another, as in this SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP model of marriage, the overriding concern is to keep in contact. This is met, by this husband, with an INQUIRY model (effortful activity), which involves "space to kind of work out where each of us were," "a lot of searching," "miles of talking," and "communicating." These husbands all seem to agree that marriage requires some effortful activity. The particular effort required depends upon a prior conceptualization of the nature of the relationship itself. In each case, the metaphorical model of the relationship is problematic in some entailment, the problem solution becomes a goal of the marriage, and a solution for this marital goal is couched in a further metaphorical model. Whether this view of marriage as problem and solution is universal cross-culturally, or whether it is a distinctively American way of viewing marriage, perhaps certain other relationships, and even other aspects of life, I can only speculate.

What do these observations suggest for a theory of metaphorical understanding? First, ongoing metaphorical understandings are relatively stable

and these stable understandings are based in underlying metaphorical models. Metaphorical expressions which instantiate a given model can be varied at will to take advantage of different properties of concrete objects or events. Thus MARRIAGE IS BUILDING A DURABLE PRODUCT allows its user to understand his marital experience in terms of conernstones, reassembled parts, and the gelling process with equal facility.

Second, these underlying metaphorical models themselves cannot be anything at all. They are constrained to members of those classes which are culturally appropriate source domains for the target experience (to use Carbonell's [1981] terms). Members of a culture share knowledge of these appropriate source domains. A considerable economy of learning and memory is achieved in this organization of cultural knowledge by metaphorical class that would be lost if target experiences were assigned directly to culturally permissible metaphors or metaphorical models. Within classes, an individual has latitude in selecting whatever metaphorical model does the best job of characterizing, for that person, the target experience.

Third, underlying metaphorical models cannot be studied in isolation from one another. In ongoing understanding, they frequently bear relationships to one another. Here I have given an example of metaphorical models which are mapped onto entailments of other metaphorical models by way of goal implementation. Elsewhere, Johnson (1982) has provided a hypothetical example of a different kind of mapping, which we might distinguish as substitution. While metaphorical models, as I have claimed here, are relatively stable understandings of experience, it often happens that one such model ceases to adequately capture experience for its user. Another model which shares multiple entailments with the earlier one may then be substituted for it; the shared entailments serve as bridges. If time allowed, I would give additional examples of such substitution from my material. For instance, the husband who conceptualized marriage as BEING A COUPLE felt that he and his wife were growing closer over time, and spoke of his more recent marital experience as BEING ONE PERSON. Given goal implementation, substitution, and other possible relationships between metaphorical models, it becomes critical to study the understanding process in the context of life story discourse.

References

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