

Metaphor Wars:

Conceptual Metaphor in Human Life

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Cognitive linguistics is famous for, among many things, its claim that metaphors are a fundamental part of everyday thought and not just purely linguistic, communicative devices that mostly serve ornamental purpose. Since 1980, an enormous body of empirical evidence from cognitive linguistics and related disciplines has emerged detailing how conceptual metaphors underlie significant aspects of language. Conceptual metaphors have been revealed in virtually every language in which metaphor has been studied, and they have been shown to be evident in many nonlinguistic facets of life, including bodily gestures, mathematics, music, art, dance, and various other human actions. In many people's view, "conceptual metaphor theory" (CMT) is the most dominant theory within the large, diverse multidisciplinary world of metaphor research.

Despite its influence and popularity, there have been major criticisms of CMT. These negative reactions to the "metaphor-in-thought" thesis have led to a series of battles among metaphor scholars, both within and across academic disciplines, which together constitute the metaphor wars that are the subject of this talk. The major argument in metaphor wars concerns the legitimacy of drawing inferences about human thought and experience from the analysis of what people say and write. How do we really know if a speaker's metaphoric talk necessarily indicates active metaphoric thought?

My talk outlines some of the research in support of CMT, describes some of the criticism of the theory, and offers some responses to the negative reactions. I will argue, conceptual metaphors may be emergent products of multiple, nested factors (i.e., biological, historical, cultural, social, cognitive, and linguistic factors), and may interact with many knowledge sources and experiences to create context-sensitive, task-specific metaphoric behaviors in humans. Conceptual metaphor may be an essential ingredient in a comprehensive theory of metaphor, yet it clearly is not the only part of that story.