

Review paper on kövecses (2005)

A Huge Step toward the Cultural Theory of Metaphor Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation

Zoltán Kövecses

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In contrast to previous studies of metaphor in cognitive linguistics, (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Grady 1997, Kövecses 2002), Kövecses clearly marks a big step in the direction of a cultural theory of metaphor, and with his long experience in metaphor studies and his discussion of a wide array of metaphorical expressions, he opens up enormous areas of possibility in new ways of studying metaphor.

In the preface, he lists these questions:

- How does the body provide for universality in metaphor, or does it do so at all?
- What's the best methodology to get metaphorical data?
- Does metaphor create certain kinds of experience, or does it simply reflect a preexisting literally-understood experience?
- Do “conceptual metaphors” vary from culture to culture, and if they do, why?
- How does metaphor contribute to the understanding of specific situated speech events in culture?

- How does metaphor create coherence or incoherence in culture?
- How can the study of metaphor provide a link between cognitive science and anthropology, and what kind of link can it provide?

In chapter 1 (p.4), he gives the following potentially shocking answers to some of these questions:

- Universal experiences do not necessarily lead to universal metaphors;
- Bodily experience may be selectively used in the creation of metaphors;
- Bodily experience may be overridden by both culture and cognitive processes;
- Primary metaphors are not necessarily universal;
- Metaphors are not necessarily based on bodily experience - many are based on cultural considerations and cognitive processes of various kinds.

These statements are more like revolts against the cognitive linguistic tradition of metaphor studies, but they certainly reclaim an appropriate position for culture in the tradition of metaphor studies. In sum, Kövecses strikes a healthy balance of previous metaphor studies with cultural aspects of metaphors and opens up a vast and promising field of cultural metaphor studies.

In the remainder of this review, I will follow the order of materials in the book to give a brief overview. Then I will summarize the importance of this book and the direction in which cultural theory of metaphor might go/ seems to be going/ should go.

1. Outline of the book

This book consists of four sections and twelve chapters. The section titles

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are as follows:

PART I: Universal metaphors

PART II: Dimensions of metaphor variation

PART III: Aspects of metaphor involved in variation

PART IV: Causes of metaphor variation

1.1 Universal metaphors

After an introduction which clarifies the devices of the cognitive theory of metaphor, Kövecses deals with the issue of universality in Chapters 2 and 3. He states the main purpose of Chapter 1 as follows:

The main question I wish to address in this chapter is this: Why is it that many people who are familiar with the view of metaphor that originates from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* so often expect that metaphors in the cognitive linguistic view should be largely or mostly universal? And related to this, why is it that people so often criticize this view for ignoring the apparent diversity of metaphors across and even within cultures?

Kövecses (2005: 17)

The same question he answers at the end of Chapter 2 as follows:

Why do people familiar with the theory expect most metaphors to be universal? The answer is this: If metaphor is based on the way the human body and brain function and we as human beings are alike at the level of this functioning, then most of the metaphors people use must also be fairly similar, that is universal.

Kövecses (2005: 34)

In chapter 3, he takes five target domains of metaphor: HAPPINESS, ANGER, EVENT STRUCTURE, TIME, SELF, to show the universality of metaphor. Even with these seemingly universal metaphors, it is shown that there exist some kinds of cultural variation at some level.

HAPPINESS is shown to have three metaphors that are the same in English, Chinese and Hungarian. They are HAPPINESS IS UP (“I’m feeling up”), HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (“She brightened up”), HAPPINESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER (“He’s bursting with joy”).

ANGER is a good candidate for universal metaphors and is studied here in English, Chinese, Japanese, Hungarian, Wolof, Zulu and Polish. Kövecses points out that the THE ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER metaphor seems universal. Examples of this metaphor in English are as given below:

- (1) His pent-up anger welled inside him.
- (2) He was bursting with anger.
- (3) I blew my stack.
- (4) His anger finally came out.

English and Chinese have remarkably similar expressions for EVENT STRUCTURE and Kövecses adds that Hungarian has the same kind of expression. Universality in TIME metaphors is then shown with data from English, Puri Indian, Chinese, and Hungarian. Universality in SELF metaphors is shown with examples from English, Japanese and Hungarian.

1.2 Dimensions of metaphor variation

In Part II, Kövecses discusses dimensions of metaphorical variation. Chapter 4 discusses cross-cultural variation and Chapter 5 discusses intra-

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cultural variation, but because of the constraints of space, I will mainly discuss dimensions of cross-cultural variation here. The distinction between the term “dimensions” and the term “aspects” discussed in Part III is a slightly confusing one, but it seems that *aspects* mean different components of the cognitive theory of metaphor (such as source domain, target domain, mapping, and entailments) whereas *dimensions* means other ways of looking at the typology of metaphor. He discusses three types: congruent metaphors, alternative metaphors, and preferential conceptualization. This is a typology based on the relationship between universal metaphors and cultural variation.

1.2.1 Congruent metaphors

Even with the near universal status of THE ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER, there are accompanying cultural metaphors, which are totally harmonic with the universal metaphor. Kövecses calls these phenomena congruent and these metaphors are called *congruent metaphors*.

He gives three examples: Japanese *hara*, the Zulu word for heart and Chinese *qi*. Japanese expression of the CONTAINER metaphor often involves *hara*, belly. This is a specific cultural characteristic of the Japanese version of the CONTAINER metaphor. The Zulu word for heart works in more or less the same way. The Chinese CONTAINER metaphor involves the concept of *qi*, 氣, which is not a fluid nor necessarily hot. *qi*, 氣 is a gas neutral with respect to heat. This energy flows through the body. Kövecses states “The most remarkable feature of the Chinese anger metaphor is that it employs and is crucially constituted by the concept of *qi* — a concept that is deeply embedded in the long history of Chinese philosophy and medicine.”

1.2.2 Alternative metaphors

Alternative metaphors are basically different metaphors with the same target domain or the same source domain. Three types of alternative metaphors are listed. One is the result of variation in the source (different source domains for the same target domain; *range of target* in Kövecses's term). The second involves variation in the target (different target domains for the same source domain: *scope of source* in Kövecses's term). The third results from large-scale alternative conceptualization. Here, the source and the target are the same in different languages, but the actual mapping is different. We will see more of this source and target variation in 1.3.

1.2.3 Preferential conceptualization

A very interesting case is shown for the differences in the LIFE metaphor between English and Hungarian. According to the study conducted by Kövecses (Kövecses 2002), English and Hungarian have almost the same metaphors, but the ranking or preference is different. He asked 20 American students in Hungary and 20 Hungarians to write a one to two page essay about life. The results are summarized in the table below:

American	Hungarian
1. LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION	1. LIFE IS A STRUGGLE/WAR
2. LIFE IS A GAME	2. LIFE IS A COMPROMISE
3. LIFE IS A JOURNEY	3. LIFE IS A JOURNEY
4. LIFE IS A CONTAINER	4. LIFE IS A GIFT
5. LIFE IS A GAMBLE	5. LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY
6. LIFE IS A COMPROMISE	6. LIFE IS A PUZZLE
7. LIFE IS AN EXPERIMENT	7. LIFE IS A LABYRINTH
8. LIFE IS A TEST	8. LIFE IS A GAME
9. LIFE IS WAR	9. LIFE IS FREEDOM
10. LIFE IS PLAY	10. LIFE IS A CHALLENGE

Table 1. Preferential metaphors for LIFE in English and Hungarian

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One can see that JOURNEY, GAMBLE, GAME, COMPROMISE and WAR metaphors show up in both languages. We could say that the counterpart of LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION in English is LIFE IS A GIFT in Hungarian. However, the ranking of these metaphors drastically differs in the two languages.

1.3 Aspects of metaphor involved in variation

As for aspects of metaphor, Kövecses discusses six. They are: source, target, relationships between the source and the target, mapping, entailments, and blends.

1.3.1 Source

An interesting case of variation caused by cultural difference is in the source domain. Chinese and English share the metaphor POLITICS IS SPORTS, but typical examples differ, with American football or baseball in English and table tennis, volleyball or soccer in Chinese.

Another interesting example is shown in Chapter 10 (p.254). According to Paul Chilton and George Lakoff, in the United States and much of the Western world, the typical house is a free standing boxlike structure on its own fenced land and a family living in it. However, the typical Russian house (*dom*) is a large apartment house with several units with families of tenants living in them. Kövecses states:

...A case in point is the last Soviet leader Gorbachev's metaphor: A COMMON EUROPEAN HOUSE. Gorbachev's metaphor was viewed with suspicion by several Western states, including the United States. The Russian interpretation of the metaphor emphasized common responsibilities and a common structure (with a plurality of independent living units). The Western idea of a house emphasized a

single unit, no internal separations, no common structure, and walls around the house.

1.3.2 Target

The target domain may have been culturally shaped so that the same metaphor may have a different cultural connotation. Kövecses cites Emanatian (1995) on comparison between English and Chagga, an African language spoken in Tanzania. Both English and Chagga have similar metaphors for sexual desire, such as SEXUAL DESIRE IS EATING, ANIMAL BEHAVIOR, and HEAT. However, unlike English, Chagga's concept of sexual desire only pertains to the male and not to the female. This means that the domain of desire is structured differently in Chagga, yielding different entailments for the same metaphor.

1.3.3 Relationships between the source and the target

This category includes alternative metaphors discussed in Chapter 3. One type of variation is in the source (different source domains for the same target domain), and another variation is in the target (different target domains for the same source domain).

1.3.3.1 Variation in the source domain

There are three good illustrations of this kind of variability in metaphors. One is the HAPPINESS metaphor. HAPPINESS IS UP, HAPPINESS IS LIGHT, HAPPINESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER may be common and near universals, but Chinese has a HAPPINESS IS FLOWERS IN THE HEART metaphor. In contrast, English has a HAPPINESS IS BEING OFF THE GROUND metaphor.

Another example of cultural variation in the source domain is in TIME

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metaphors. Aymata Trique, Maori, and Ancient Greek have FUTURE IS BACK; PAST IS FRONT metaphors as opposed to the more common FUTURE IS FRONT; PAST IS BACK metaphors.

Finally source variation can be seen in the LIFE IS A STRING metaphor in Hmong, spoken mainly in Laos and Thailand. Hmong speakers have a STRING metaphor for life in their linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior.

1.3.3.2 Variation in the target domain

Kövecses shows the following BUILDING metaphors as shared in English, German, French and Russian. He also does a follow up survey and confirms their presence in Japanese and Brazilian Portuguese.

THEORIES/ ECONOMIC SYSTEMS/ SOCIAL GROUPS ARE BUILDINGS
A RELATIONSHIP/A CAREER/ A COMPANY/ A LIFE IS A BUILDING

However, he found a different target domain for BUILDINGS in another language he surveyed, Tunisian Arabic.

EDUCATING CHILDREN IS BUILDING

1.3.4 Mapping

Kövecses cites an example from a study by Olaf Jakel (2002) on an English version of the Old Testament. The ordinary LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor has roughly the following mapping:

Travelers → people leading their lives

Motion along the way → leading one's life

Destination(s) of the journey → purpose(s) of life

Obstacles along the way → difficulties in life

Different paths to one's destination(s) → different means of achieving one's purpose(s)

Distance covered along the way → progress made in life

Locations along the way → stages in life

Guides along the way → helpers or counselors in life

Now, the Old Testament version of LIFE IS A JOURNEY has a different mapping.

Travelers → people leading a life

Motion along the way → leading life

Obstacles along the way → difficulties in life

Guides along the way → helpers or counselors in life

The only other pieces of mapping included in the Old Testament version are these:

Leading a moral life → making a journey on God's way

God's way → a straight path

God's way → leading to eternal life

evil ways → crooked paths

the wicked → people wandering off God's way

God → the guide who leads the righteous.

Whether these are variant pieces of mapping or different metaphors combined with the common LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is yet to be examined, but it is true that the complex Old Testament version in total has

a radically different mapping from the common version.

1.3.5 Entailments

Entailments and inference mean basically the same thing in the cognitive theory of metaphor. Intricate source domain knowledge can be mapped and can give metaphorical entailments. Kövecses points out that there are cases in which inference works in one language but not in another language.

Taylor and Mbense (1998) compare English and Zulu. In Zulu one can *extinguish* somebody's anger by pouring water on him or her. This entailment is not seen in English¹. Therefore, certain entailments can be mapped in one language but not in another, yielding another type of variation.

1.3.6 Blends

Kövecses cites an example from Szilvia Csábi to illustrate blending. It is a case of talking about the settlement of America as the Exodus from Egypt in the Bible. Expressions such as *New English Nehemiah* to refer to the leader of the settlers of America are claimed to be a case of blending, as there is no New England in the source domain, or Nehemiah in the target domain.

1.4 Causes of metaphor variation

PART IV discusses causes of variation and Kövecses suggests two large groups: differential experience and differential cognitive preferences or styles. For differential experience he lists context (physical environment, social context, including power relations, social pressure, cultural context, communicative situation), differential memory/role of history (social history, personal history), differential concerns and interests (personal concerns and interests, personal concerns and interests). For differential cognitive

preferences and styles, he lists experiential focus, viewpoint preference, prototypes and framing, metaphor versus metonymy preference.

2. Significance of this book and future directions of the cognitive metaphor theory

Here I will summarize the significance of this book and also look into possible future directions of the cognitive theory of metaphor.

2.1 Significance of this book

The importance of this book can be summarized as below. First of all, Kövecses has shown convincingly that there is much more cultural diversity than has been claimed in the cognitive theory of metaphor. Even a seeming universal metaphor with a very strong bodily motivation such as ANGER IS HEAT or ANGER IS (HOT) LIQUID does not appear to be a real universal as the Chinese ANGER metaphor involves neither heat nor liquid. A research program has been set to pursue universal metaphors, but TIME, SELF and other metaphors still seem to lack data from enough languages to claim universality.

Secondly, in this book, Kövecses lays out a basic mechanism for metaphor theory and cultural system to pinpoint where cultural diversity comes from. He lists eleven component parts for the cognitive theory of metaphor (target domain, source domain, etc.) and two groupings for the causes of metaphorical diversity (differential experience and differential cognitive preferences). Using these and subsequent groupings, we now have tools to discuss cultural diversity in the theory of metaphor.

Thirdly, the vast data presented in this book make it a real must for metaphor researchers. In the course of its explanation of cultural variation and universality, it touches on the most of the important past data and also

adds many more recent examples with a variety of methods to study metaphor.

Finally, this book provides a great opportunity for revisiting the old issue of motivation. The nature of particular metaphors is not at all arbitrary. The cognitive theory of metaphor provides a concept called *experiential grounding* (ground in I.A. Richards' term), reasons why metaphors are what they are. But on the other hand, this book shows clearly that the mere existence of experiential grounding does not always result in the existence of the related metaphor. Therefore, it is normally the case that experiential grounding only suggests the possibility of the existence of a metaphor and does not predict what kinds of metaphors exist in the world's languages. This is a case of the old Saussurian concept of *motivation*, which is, not *arbitrary*, but not *predictable*. With this situation in hand, the questions that come to our mind are: How strong is experiential grounding in general? What is the strength of each experiential grounding? When are they realized as metaphor and when are they not? What are inhibiting factors for particular experiential groundings to be realized as metaphors? We have now foundations to think about and discuss how motivated metaphor is.

2.2 Future directions of the cognitive theory of metaphor

We saw that a given metaphor can rarely be shared by all languages, but at the same time it is often the case that the same metaphors recur in many languages. Considering this situation, what kind of research directions are there to account for these seemingly contradictory facts?

We could pursue the direction demonstrated by Kövecses with his demonstration of research into the relations between American culture and the metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW. In this method we can look at a particular metaphor seemingly unique to one culture and research it from various

directions such as language, advertisements, cartoons, and gestures.

Another good and healthy way of studying cultural variation is to look at preferential metaphors as shown in Chapter 4. It is often the case that languages share a repertoire of the same metaphors, but the ranking of the importance of each of them may differ drastically. This is also a good way to examine the issue of motivation, how universality and cultural variation interact.

Yet another very interesting way of studying cultural variation in metaphor is to study cases of misunderstood metaphors. As the case of COMMON EUROPEAN HOUSE shows, misunderstood metaphors present a great opportunity to reveal otherwise hidden deep cultural differences in concepts. HOUSE, SCHOOL, BEAR, BREAKFAST, COUNTRY, and all other concepts are potentially subject to cultural (mis-) interpretations, affected by practices, prototypes and frames of their own culture. Misunderstood metaphor highlights such variations in interpreting concepts.

Now, is there way to look more into universality? A lot of the issues of universality and variation in metaphor seem to depend on how we formulate metaphor. Let's take the example of the POLITICS IS SPORTS metaphor. With the same metaphor in English and Chinese, the mapping and entailment are different because Americans use football and baseball more, whereas Chinese use table tennis and volleyball more. Should we label the American metaphor as POLITICS IS BASEBALL/FOOTBALL and the Chinese metaphor as POLITICS IS TABLE TENNIS/VOLLYBALL? Let's take another example, the EUROPE IS A COMMON HOUSE metaphor. Should we state this metaphor of Gorbachov as EUROPE IS A RUSSIAN TYPE COMMON HOUSE? We can toy with the level of metaphor and get universality or variation. However, there should be a good level of labelling or description of naming of metaphors, and this could be a good way to

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decide a level of universality, and also a good question to ask for improvement to the theoretical side of the cognitive theory of metaphor.

3. Conclusion

Kövecses (2005) is a big step as a cultural theory of metaphor. In this review, I have partially summarized the content of the book and examined potential effects on the cognitive theory of metaphor. Kövecses (2005) also has a great deal of data that metaphor researchers should take into account in studying and making theories of metaphor, not to mention the fact that these examples are extremely interesting to see in themselves.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the flesh*. New York: Basic Books.

Grady, Joe. 1997. THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS revisited. *Cognitive Linguistics* 8(4), 267-290.

Kövecses, Zoltán. 2002. *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Note)

1 As pointed out by Kövecses, it's possible in the English ENTHUSIASM metaphor as when someone is said to be *a wet blanket* at a party.