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The Preconceptual Basis of Experiential Metaphor

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Standard models of metaphoric comprehension share at least the following set of basic assumptions: (1) Meaning is conceptual structure. (2) Comprehending a metaphor of the form "A is B" requires a grasp of the appropriate conceptual structure for the "A" and "B" (topic-vehicle) components, and it also requires the ability to map the B domain onto the A domain in a contextually appropriate fashion. (3) The mapping or projection procedure depends principally on underlying similarities between the two domains. Versions of this position differ as to the nature of the mapping mechanism. Some treat the metaphoric projection as a simple transfer of discrete properties or relations from the B domain over to the A domain, with appropriate changes being made to apply the transferred predicates to the new domain. Others argue that a more complex model is needed, one in which the entire system of predicates for the B domain, with all of its complex internal relations, must somehow be projected as a whole in such a way as to restructure the conceptual system for the A domain.

It is commonly believed by those who operate with some version of this standard model that the chief problem posed by metaphor for artificial intelligence is to discover the way in which contextual clues determine the precise nature of the projective process of metaphoric understanding. While I agree that this is the main difficulty, I want to suggest that it is less amenable to solution than most cognitive scientists believe. The reason for my pessimism is that, contrary to the accepted view, understanding a metaphor is not just a process of grasping certain conceptual structurings. In the metaphors of ordinary and technical discourse alike, there is also a preconceptual basis in experience that gives the metaphor the meaning it has and that cannot be reduced to concepts or conceptual structure (as mental representations).

My argument is based upon an analysis of some of the preconceptual factors involved in the comprehension of what I call "experiential" metaphors. An experiential metaphor is a process of experiencing, conceptualizing, and talking about one domain of experience as it is structured in terms of another domain of a different kind. Such metaphors are basic processes of everyday experience, and they are not mere linguistic ornaments or rhetorical modes of expression. The experiential metaphor MARRIAGE IS A BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP, for example, is one of several metaphors in American culture that structures the way some people understand, act out, and reason about their marriages. It is not a matter of mere words that we use to talk about marriage; rather, it is one possible structuring of marital relations that provides coherence, order, and significance in the lives of those who live by the metaphor.

But the MARRIAGE IS A BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP metaphor is more than a conceptual structuring of some aspects of one's marriage. It involves non-structural, preconceptual elements without which the metaphor would have no significance for us. These preconceptual elements in experience consist of various capacities, skills, values, and purposes in which the conceptual structures are rooted and from which they take their nourishment. With reference to the BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP metaphor I identify four such elements: (1) General human purposes, (2) Cultural institutions and practices, (3) Theoretical paradigms, (4) Individual characteristics and patterns (including (i) individual purposes, (ii) individual tastes

and values, and (iii) personality traits).

I am claiming that understanding a metaphor involves more than grasping conceptual structure—it also involves preconceptual elements that are neither discrete predicates nor structured relations. Such elements are a basic part of our ordinary experience without which no metaphor could have the power it does to shape our understanding, action, and language. If this analysis is correct, it calls for a rethinking of certain fundamental assumptions guiding work on metaphor in cognitive science.