Lecture 7

Metaphor, Metonymy, and Blending

My seventh lecture in the series is predominantly on metaphor. I will not enough time actually, to go into metonymy and I have only a few words to say about metonymy at the end. So to some extent, the title is deceptive. It is basically about metaphor actually.

Now for many people who don’t know much about cognitive linguistics, they tend to have the impression that cognitive linguistics is the study of metaphor. So cognitive linguistics, actually for many people is equated with metaphor. If you do cognitive linguistics, you do metaphor. That is actually not quite true. There are other important topics in cognitive linguistics, but metaphor certainly is a very important one. The topic was basically put on the agenda by George Lakoff, which I am sure you know about. I have got here a couple of important, well, defining works. Well, Lakoff and his colleague Johnson, who is basically a philosopher rather than a linguist. Their two books Metaphors We Live by and twenty years later Philosophy in the Flesh. Crucial works for the cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor.


Interestingly, the other big name in cognitive linguistics, Ronald Langacker, actually hasn’t said very much about metaphor. So Langacker, Langacker’s works shows in fact that you can do cognitive linguistics without doing metaphor.

But anyway I want to briefly outline the main aspects of Lakoff’s theory. Most of you, well, I don’t actually know your background but I imagine that many or most of you would be in fact very familiar with this. So what I have to say in the first part of my lecture basically is addressed to those people who...
are perhaps not quite so familiar with this topic. Then in the second half I will raise some problems that I have and other people have with Lakoff’s theory of metaphor, and then finally go on to say something about the theory of blending, which is the theory, which actually in a way supersedes Lakoff’s metaphor theory. It includes and covers Lakoff’s metaphor theory but it includes much more else besides. OK, so the theory of blending in fact is much more general and metaphor is just one small aspect of blending.

People have been studying metaphor, well, certainly in the West for two and half thousands years. It’s been an important topic in Western thinking about language, about philosophy, and of course literary criticism. And metaphor is often thought of as something which is used in poetry, in literature for sort of rhetorical or expressive effects. What Lakoff did, what Lakoff and Johnson did was to point out that much ordinary language is deeply metaphorical, metaphor is not restricted to poetry or to creative writing or to special expressive language but ordinary everyday language, even the most common and ordinary of expressions can be metaphorical and can have metaphorical basis.

We started out from these premises and arrived at these conclusions.
We have arrived at a crucial point in the argument.
Where are you going with this?
I see where you are coming from.
You’ve wandering off the topic.
Let’s move on to the next point.
Can you go over that again for me?

Here are some examples. These are Lakoff’s examples. In fact these are taken from my own book on cognitive grammar from two or three years ago. If you consider these expressions, which are used to talk about a discussion, you are having a discussion and you report on this discussion that you had. What kind of things might you say about the discussion that you have? Well, you might say we started out from these premises. Premises, you know, it’s an assumption, what you assume and then you use a metaphor to build on it. We started out from the premises and we arrived at this conclusion. So you start from or start out from your premise, you argue, and then you arrive at the conclusion.

Now in the course of the discussion, you might say well, we have now arrived at the crucial point in the argument. We have arrived at the crucial point in the argument or we’re having this discussion and you start saying something and then I say to you where are you going with this? I don’t see the point. Where are you going with this, with these remarks? Or else some might say to