

The Abstract / Concrete Divide

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This presentation concerns a basic methodological issue in the categorization of metaphors according to degree of conventionality, as well as in their identification. I employ a slightly modified version of Deignan's (2005: 39-52) methodology for corpus-based classification. She suggests more or less clear-cut procedures to use when categorizing actual instances of linguistic metaphor. In my project, metaphors are categorized as *conventional* or *dead* through semantic analysis of the domains involved. More specifically, if the source domain is concrete and the target domain abstract, then the metaphorical expression is *conventional*, following Deignan's reasoning that a concrete domain is more salient than an abstract one and that interpretation of the abstract sense depends on knowledge of the concrete sense. An additional criterion is that the sense be found in the dictionary, unlike the contextual sense of *novel* metaphors. *Dead* metaphors, by contrast, are characterized by concrete-concrete mappings because both domains are perceived as equally core, and knowledge of one domain is not necessary for knowledge of the other.

I have encountered an unanticipated problem in this categorization process. The categorization of metaphors as either *dead* or *conventional* hinges on the identification of target and source domains as either concrete or abstract. In some cases, however, the dividing line between the abstract and concrete is not clear. Moreover, this same distinction often constitutes the deciding factor in determining whether a lexical unit is metaphorically used according to the Metaphor Identification Procedure. Are *communications*, *techniques*, *announcements*, *spectre*, and *entertainment* concrete or abstract terms? Apart from Grady (1997) and Danesi (2001, 2004), the literature on metaphor does not discuss precise and workable definitions of exactly what is concrete and what is abstract, perhaps because the distinction is intuitive and seemingly simple. Indeed, the division between abstract and concrete may be gradable in the sense that concepts may be more or less concrete than others (see eg Kövecses 2002, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Thus the distinction between abstract and concrete becomes less straightforward than one might first have anticipated when applied in practice.

References

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