

**Zoltan Kövecses (2006): Language, mind and culture: a practical introduction, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 400 S.**

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The book is a practical introduction to issues relating to language, mind and culture, written within the framework of cognitive linguistics (and rarely straying away from this framework to explore different points of view on these matters). It is practical in the sense that it provides exercises at the end of each chapter, which, this reviewer found, were the most enjoyable parts of the book. It contains chapters dealing with; Meaning in mind, language, and culture; Categorizing the world: prototypes, theories, and linguistic relativity; Levels of interacting with the world: cognitive and cultural considerations; Contesting categories in Culture: debates about art [this was a bit more novel than the other chapters which go, for cognitive linguists at least, over quite familiar ground], Organizing knowledge about the world: frames in the mind; The frame analysis of culture; Mappings within frames: metonymy as a cognitive and cultural process; Mappings across frames: metaphor; Metaphoric frames: some cultural and social applications; Metaphor variation across and within cultures; Meaning and thought: literal or figurative?; The embodied mind: the role of image-schemas; Alternative construal of the world; Constructing meaning in discourse: mental spaces; Conceptual blends and material anchors: some examples of conceptual integration; Cognition and grammar: the cognitive structure of language; Summing it up: an account of meaningful experience.

For those unfamiliar with cognitive linguistics the book may be useful. It engages the reader and it opens up new vistas on language and meaning. For those already familiar with cognitive linguistics, the book might not be quite as useful, as it goes over rather familiar ground.

### ***Preface***

Let's begin with the first sentence: "This book is an attempt to provide a new way of studying how we make sense of our experience." (Preface, vii) This got me quite excited and I quickly leafed through the book to see how this attempt would unfold. I soon found that the 'we' invoked in this sentence is completely absent from the book. Meaning is seen as emerging from 'the mind' and as being partially shaped by 'culture'. However, the most essential aspects of meaning, namely social interaction and context are completely ignored. I

should declare my ideological background here. For me meaning and pragmatics; language, action and culture; language and context and so on are inextricably linked. As Dewey wrote in 1925:

[...] the sound, gesture, or written mark which is involved in language is a particular existence. But as such it is not a *word*, and it does not become a word by declaring a mental existence; it becomes a word by gaining meaning; and it gains meaning when its use establishes a genuine community of action. [...] Person and thing must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence. The community of partaking is meaning. (pp. 184-185)

In the next paragraph of the preface the author states that cognitive linguistics is a relatively new branch of cognitive science. This is misleading. Cognitive linguistics regards *itself* as a new branch of cognitive science. It is a matter of empirical analysis to find out whether cognitive scientists regard it as a branch of cognitive science, what proportion of cognitive scientists do or don't and what their reasons may be for regarding it as a branch of cognitive science or not. This is important, as the author makes many statements regarding 'the mind' and 'cognition' which are topics covered by cognitive scientists who might, however, have quite different views about these matters and might not want to be associated with such views. I shall come back to some of these statements below and try to show why cognitive scientists in particular and critical readers of the book in general might find them irksome.

In the third paragraph the author says that the book is interested in cultural meaning-making activity. Some references to research dealing with just that cultural-meaning making activity, published for example in *metaphorik.de* and based on a critique of some core tenets of CL, might have been useful here.

### ***Chapter 1: Meaning in mind, language and culture***

In a section confusingly called "the kinds of issues in a theory of mind" ('theory of mind' has a quite specific meaning in cognitive science which is not the same as 'a theory of the mind'), the author says with relation to the faculties that make up the mind (or not!):

"The 'standard' traditional conception of the faculties of the mind operates with the following four aspects: reason-thought-thinking, morality, emotion, and willing-volition." (p. 5) – It would be interesting to know who proposed

this ‘standard conception’? What about memory, imagination, judgement, and perception?

With relation to meaning, he points out that some think meaning is based on use (but devotes only half a sentence to this issue), but, like many cognitive linguists, he mainly identifies meaning with the concepts we have in our conceptual system (p. 8). The whole chapter is based on dichotomies, such as use/concepts, form/function, objective/experiential, literal/figurative and so on. The author fails to point out that one can also adopt a position that goes beyond such dichotomies and sees form and function for example as co-constitutive evolutionary and mutually adaptive phenomena (I shall come back to this later).

### ***Chapter 2: Categorizing the world***

The author claims that “conceptual categories can be *identified* with meaning in language” (italics added) Can they? Where is the evidence? And the author continues by saying: “In addition, it is conceptual categories that make up a large part of thought” (p. 17) Really? Where is the evidence and what does ‘make up’ mean here? This might have been a point where more information from cognitive science research could have been used to bolster claims made in cognitive linguistics.

Regarding the acquisition of categories the author draws on Barsalou’s work and distinguishes between a series of steps. The first is “Form a structural description of the entity”, the second “Search for category representations similar to the structural description”, and so on (p. 18). The author uses ‘we’ again in a peculiar sense: “First we perceive the most primitive properties of an entity we encounter...Second, we search for category representations...” etc. It would be interesting to know who this ‘we’ is. Is it the child learning categories or adults learning new categories (and I should add that whatever category acquisition might be, it is a continuous, ongoing and flexible process)?

While I continued reading the book I went for a walk in the park. I passed a family with young children and heard a four-year old boy say: “But Mummy, dogs go woof, woof, not wow, wow!” Now, we all know that dogs go neither ‘woof, woof’, nor do they go ‘wow, wow’, although my son and I agreed that ‘ruff, ruff’ would be the best approximation, at least in English. What this utterance highlighted is that languages are conventional means of transmitting

meaning and that language learning is based on acquiring these conventions. The little boy learned from somebody ‘how dogs go’, and that was that for him. His concept of ‘how dogs go’ was settled. This may have nothing do with forming a structural description of an entity and searching for category representations etc etc. The issue of convention in language acquisition, category acquisition and metaphor use should have been explored in more detail, I believe (for a more informed discussion of concept learning see Lambert and Shanks, 1997).

I had a similar feeling when reading the lengthy discussion of what it means to say that a meeting has been moved ‘forward’ (p. 185). This might have less to do with conceptual metaphors and more with what meaning one has learned to associate with an expression. And sometimes one person has learned to attribute quite a different meaning to an expression compared to somebody else. Some weeks ago I ordered a taxi to get me to the airport. I did this well in advance and said that it should come ‘next Thursday’, meaning next week on Thursday. I made the phone call on Wednesday, and was astonished when I was woken up the next day at five o’clock in the morning by my taxi driver who had obviously understood the word ‘next’ quite differently in this context.

The whole issue of conventionality came to the fore in the chapter on meaning and thought. The author states on p. 201:

A part of our conceptual system consists of abstract concepts that are metaphorically defined. The definition of an abstract concept by means of metaphor takes place automatically and unconsciously. [...] there are many concepts like these [e.g. marriage] that are defined or constituted by conceptual metaphors. And they are so constituted unconsciously and without cognitive effort. [...] It is the supraindividual level in the sense that it consists of a *static and highly conventionalized system of mappings* between physical source and abstract target domains. (Italics added)

Firstly, not all abstract concepts are the same. The word ‘marriage’ might be used by activating a concept unconsciously and automatically, but that would not be the case for ‘relativity’, at least in my case. I would have to think rather hard about that one to make sense of it. And although the concept of marriage might be processed unconsciously, is it really based on a static system of mappings? As the author shows himself, it is rather flexible and adaptable, de-

pending on tradition and circumstances, similar to the concept of ‘mother’ discussed later. Conventionalised does not mean static. The author seems to make a rather antiquated distinction similar to how some view the distinction between *langue* (convention, supraindividual, static) and *parole* (dynamic, individual, discourse) (see p. 203) which then leads him to declare that some metaphorical expressions in real discourse should not occur!! It might be better to go back to a view of *langue* and *parole* that Saussure advocated in his notes to the *Cours* and according to which *parole* drives *langue* and *langue* structures *parole* – they are co-constitutive. This would get him away from saying that “the abstract target concept of ‘political structure’ is *constituted* by these [metaphorical] mappings” (italics added). It might be safer to say that the mappings, conventions and concepts co-constitute each other in dynamic discourse situations (see Nerlich, 1986).

### ***Chapter 8: Mappings across frames - metaphor***

He lists the following well-known components of a cognitive linguistic view of metaphor:

1. Source domain
  2. Target domain
  3. Basis of metaphor
  4. Neural structures that correspond to 1 and 2 in the brain
- Etc.

This sounds as if the issue of neural correlates of source and target domains was settled and obvious – again one has to ask the question: where is the evidence? There is some research being carried out in this field that goes beyond the type of ‘computational’ neuroscience that Lakoff and his associates have focused on and the type of ‘speculative neuroscience’ favoured by Turner and his followers, but this is not mentioned here (see Bambini in press, Seitz, 2005)

On pp. 119-120 he writes: “It is the brain that runs the body, and if metaphor is in the body it must also be in the brain.” What does ‘in’ mean here?

### ***Chapter 12: The embodied mind: the role of image schemas***

This provides a good overview of the topic *as seen through the eyes of cognitive linguists*. However, no reference is made to the discussion of the various meanings of ‘embodiment’ in cognitive science and the various uses of ‘schema’ in cognitive science (for a more critical account of the issue of image schemata

see Oakley, forthcoming). Yet again the author makes a statement that just begs to be supported by empirical evidence: "These aspects of the conceptual system [image schemata, etc.] make up a large portion of the mind." (p. 211) What does 'make up' and 'mind' mean in this context?

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, the book claims to provide a comprehensive and engaging account of some important aspects of meaning making (blurb on the back of the book). In my view it provides a good description of various examples of this process from the standard cognitive linguistic perspective. This description is framed by rather vague theoretical statements. However, these statements are rarely supported by empirical evidence. Furthermore, the book perpetuates a dichotomous view of language and discourse that has become rather out-dated.

I shall close with a quote from Gustav Gerber, who, more than a century ago, overturned some of dichotomies on which this book still seems to be based, such as the literal/non-literal dichotomy and the meaning/use dichotomy:

Im Leben der Sprache giebt der usus den Bedeutungen einen gewissen Halt, und diese erhalten dadurch ein Anrecht als die 'eigentlichen' zu gelten, wogegen, wenn die dem Lautgebilde eigene Natur des Tropus in einer Umwandlung der Bedeutung wieder hervortritt, dieses Neue als das 'Uneigentliche' erscheint. Verstanden wird die neue Bedeutung von den mit der Sprache Vertrauten an den Beziehungen, in welche sie zu anderen Wörtern gesetzt wird. (Gerber, 1871-74 II, I: 21)

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