15 questions about metaphor research for Gerard Steen

1. Do you have any favorite metaphor/s? What are they and what makes them your favorite ones?

My absolute favorite is the following part from Bob Dylan's song 'You're a big girl now' (*Blood on the Tracks*, 1974):

I'm going out of my mind
With a pain that stops and starts
Like a corkscrew to the heart
Ever since we've been apart.

It is almost too much to think of the familiar physical experience of inserting a corkscrew into a cork and then giving it a number of distinct twists in order to turn it in deeper and deeper, and relate that to the way your mind can insert a bout of pain into your body that you can feel with increasing intensity at distinct, consecutive moments when you've lost your lover—this is a wonderful dramatization of the whole notion of embodied cognition which is used for entirely surprising purposes in these lines.

I particularly like the idea that it is a corkscrew *to* the heart, which makes you wonder what happens when the heart is finally reached. And I also like the unexpected contrast between the regular use of a corkscrew, which is typically for pleasure, and Dylan's appropriation, which changes it into an instrument of torture—and this is exactly right, for when you are in such pain, it is as if some person outside yourself keeps hurting you with perfect control, even though it is your own memories and associations that are causing this. The image and its effects are brilliant.

2. Why metaphor research?

Metaphor research offers a small laboratory for a lot of research on language, cognition and communication. Given the ubiquity of metaphor in the structures of language and thought that has been revealed in cognitive linguistics, metaphor raises questions about the

relations between these semiotic structures and functions (in language, thought, and communication) on the one hand and the way these can be observed to have effects (or no effects) in the psychological and social dimensions of behavioral processes. (I see culture and history as arenas of variation and change between such psycho-social events of discourse.) In that way, metaphor raises questions about the relation between the humanities and the social sciences that have to do with the validity and eventually applicability of what humanities scholars have to offer: is what they see in their eventually semiotic analyses always operational in regular behavior?

This has been at the center of my interests since I was trained as an empirical student of literature in the 1980s. This was a new movement that arose as a result of a typically German discussion about theories and methods between the humanities and the social sciences, going back to the notorious Positivismusstreit between Popper and Adorno. Literature is just one domain of discourse in which we can make the distinction between structuralist-functionalist approaches to signs and texts on the one hand and how these signs and texts relate to people's writing and reading processes on the other, and metaphor has always been regarded as central to that literary domain. The general questions about theories (Schmidt) and methods (Groeben) in the empirical study of literature were hence the same as the ones that needed to be asked about metaphor and its use in many other domains than literature, including politics, health communication, education and science. These are the questions I have kept asking about metaphor in all language, cognition, and communication research since and they have become a central issue for present-day cognitive-linguistic and discourse-analytical approaches to metaphor.

These issues have in particular led to the idea that it is possible that there may be a paradox of metaphor. What counts as metaphor in the structures and functions of language (and thought, as defined by cognitive linguists) may not count as metaphor in the behavior of real people. This is a genuine, potentially embarrassing empirical puzzle with important theoretical and methodological ramifications and implications that go beyond the case of metaphor and extend to other

figures and general semiotic structures and functions. This explains why metaphor research is so important.

3. What do you consider to be the most important questions regarding current metaphor research?

To me there is one paramount question that follows from the paradox of metaphor, and I derive all other questions from that.

The central question is: when is metaphor processed metaphorically? In other words, and limiting myself to metaphor in language for now, which linguistic structures that are analyzed as metaphorical by linguists are realized as metaphors, that is, as cross-domain mappings, in language users' minds?

The question that immediately follows from that is: what does that mean? When neuroscientists see activation in the brain of an area that is related to the source domain of a metaphor, this suggests some position of metaphor in processing. But does it mean that this source domain is used by the language user for constructing the meaning of the metaphorical expression in which it is used? I do not think that this necessarily follows, for I think that it is also possible that polysemous words activate 'polysemous' concepts which themselves may be handled by 'conceptual disambiguation' strategies simply selecting the already available and conventionalized metaphorical concept—instead of building that metaphorical concept by projection from the original non-metaphorical concept, as was the original cognitive-linguistic proposition. What I think is needed here is a sophisticated and encompassing discourse processing model that can account for the various stages and functions of the distinct cognitive processes involved (see next question).

Other questions following from this would be how metaphor works *as* metaphor in production, which has been shamefully neglected in experimental research, one or two exceptions apart. And even though much attention has been paid in recent years to metaphor in interaction and to metaphor across discourse events in the new theory of discourse metaphor, here, too, the question whether all aspects of discourse

metaphor in fact work *as* metaphor to the people involved in these events has not been given sufficient attention. And all of this finally leads to the same question of when metaphor works as metaphor in language acquisition and cognitive development.

4. What trends of potential for development do you currently see in the field of metaphor research?

I think we need to realize that conceptual metaphor theory has built an important part of a theoretical edifice that now needs extension and in part reconstruction. We need to add at least two components, which may be compared with floors rather than wings.

First we need to go into the ground and build a much better basement, which involves the whole area of primary metaphor. I have serious doubts whether primary metaphors are metaphors (see next question) and believe that they may be metonymies, but this is a matter for theoretical and empirical investigation. What is also exciting about this area is that it can now be explored by means of neuroscientific methods examining which concepts and connections are activated at which times of processing in which parts of the brain, although the interpretation of such research is extremely difficult.

Second we need to go one floor up and show how conceptual metaphors participate in discourse metaphors which in turn give rise to metaphorical models that are publicly accessible in various (and changing) ways. I have suggested that discourse metaphors reveal the varying status of their associated underlying metaphorical models, from official and contested to implicit and emergent, and I think that this is a really exciting avenue for further research.

Both of these are trends that are already under way. What I think is most exciting in addition though, and has high potential for the next decade, is the possibility for forging connections with discourse psychology and with computational linguistics. We need discourse psychology (cognitive and social and communication-scientific) to connect our expectations about processing to more encompassing and independent models of language use in discourse events, showing

where metaphorical source domains exert which effects. This is becoming particularly important in the area of figurative framing, as I suspect that the potential framing effect of metaphor is overstated, again, on the basis of an over-valuation of the structures and functions that can be observed in texts, as opposed to the way they work in psychological and social processes. I believe that the kind of studies that we have seen so far have been of good but limited value.

And we need computational linguistics to do large scale automated research on metaphor in language (lexicons) and thought ('ontologies') *between* languages. I think that anyone who can collaborate with a computational linguist and knows how to do work on metaphor in WordNet sits on a gold mine.

Finally, all of this has to do with metaphor in language. The big question about conceptual metaphor, primary metaphor and even discourse metaphor is how these phenomena translate into non-verbal manifestations, and whether linguistic models for metaphor can be usefully transferred to non-linguistic areas such as visuals, multimodal metaphor, and gesture.

5. How do metaphor and metonymy relate to each other in your opinion?

Metaphor and metonymy are two independent phenomena, as I argued in my 2007 book *Finding metaphor in grammar and usage.* The one has to do with similarity, the other with contiguity, and these two qualities in principle operate independently from each other. This is also why they can interact, for they are not two mutually excluding categories on one scale, like man-woman or adult-child. This can also be seen in metaphor and metonymy identification—you need to establish whether an expression is metaphorical or not metaphorical independently of whether it is (also) metonymic or not metonymic.

The big issue about the relation between metaphor and metonymy, in my opinion, is whether primary metaphor is in fact metaphorical or metonymic. I believe that the definition of primary metaphor in Lakoff and Johnson (1999) as the correlation between a

sensory-motor experience and a subjective experience suggests that primary metaphor should be reconceptualized as primary metonymy. Joe Grady in his (2005) article in Beate Hampe's from *Perception to Meaning* basically acknowledges as much, and talks about primary metaphor in terms of image schemas for sensory-motor experience and response schemas for subjective experience, between which there does not have to be a metaphorical mapping. But if primary metaphor is primary metonymy, this raises fundamentally new questions about its role in the motivation of complex metaphor. This will be another exciting area for the near future.

6. What kind of metaphor research do you admire – and why?

All metaphor research that is methodologically responsible, explicit and of high quality. This means that philosophy, theory and research have to be kept functionally apart in publications, and that research has to be geared to making explicit its limitations regarding validity and reliability.

The reason for this admiration is that metaphor research is all about psychological and social processes, and their historical and cultural variation and change, and that this type of research needs to be done by the methodological standards of social science. These are not sufficiently broadly appreciated across the humanities. This does not mean that we all have to turn experimental, but that we should be careful in making the distinctions I have just mentioned. This is still not the standard in all metaphor research (see next question).

7. What kind of metaphor research do you see critically – and why?

I am critical of metaphor research that talks about structures and functions as if they are processes. For instance, conceptual mappings, whether metaphoric or metonymic, are often talked about as if they are processes, whereas they are often plain structural reconstructions of linguistic or conceptual structures. The relation between structural reconstructions and psychological or social processes is highly problematic and needs careful modeling and testing.

I am also critical of metaphor research that presents speculations about processes as facts obtained from research. Speculations are speculations and need to be formulated as such, preferably in such a way that they can be tested, whether in experimental work or in observational work.

8. What would you do if you were the executive of a research center for "Metaphor and Society" for five years?

I think the most important thing we need to find out about the way metaphor works in the real world has to do with figurative framing. Which metaphors can exert a framing effect upon which people in which circumstances? How do such figurative framing structures interact with other figures like hyperbole and irony, and how do they interact with encompassing text types like narration, argumentation, and exposition? Which other genre properties play a role in how metaphor can act like a framing device in public and private discourse? How do figurative frames accomplish their effects and how long do such effects last?

In terms of people and their behavior, how can people be taught to resist such framing effects by recognizing them for what they are? How can professionals in government and politics, in organization and management, in science and education, and in health and care be trained to use the framing powers of metaphor more effectively? And how can academics and citizens learn to evaluate metaphorical frames, criticize undesirable implications, and come up with better alternatives?

To me these are the central questions of an applied metaphorology. In fact, in our Metaphor Lab in Amsterdam we are currently undertaking new research which partly implements this program. One important but very difficult aspect of this research will be to establish how often metaphorical frames are in fact used in important debates, and how it can be established whether they have in fact had an influence on the debate that is actually due to their metaphorical nature and function. This is crucial for determining how important the issue of figurative framing in fact is for societal practices—I believe that there is a good degree of overstatement about the power of metaphor in this

area (simply because I believe that a lot of metaphor in text does not work as metaphor in cognition and interaction).

9. Which field of research – outside your own research area – is particularly exciting for you?

If I define my own research area as discourse analysis, which I take to include genre analysis and discourse processing, then perhaps to me cognitive neuro science is most exciting. It raises questions about the grounding of our cognition that are fundamental and exciting. I also think that the reach of these questions and issues is again overestimated. I fundamentally disagree with the proposition that we are our brain, but it would be nice if we found out how unconscious and conscious processing relate to cognitive freedom and control and to the immediate social constraints on them. This is why cognitive neuro science is particularly exciting for me.

10. Who or what has influenced you most in regard to researching metaphor?

There is only one answer possible here: the Pragglejaz Group. This was a group of ten metaphor researchers aiming to develop a reliable method for metaphor identification, resulting in a method called MIP, published in *Metaphor and Symbol* in 2007. We had annual meetings from the summer of 2000 until the summer of 2009, in three-day workshops where we went through the whole process of designing and testing a procedure for finding metaphor in the wild. We came from different angles of the field: cognitive linguistics, applied linguistics, stylistics, discourse analysis, and psycholinguistics. We all learned how to listen to each other, talk to each other, allow for personal and disciplinary differences but still attempt to achieve the same goal. We had vehement theoretical and methodological debates followed by boisterous drinks and dinners in bars and restaurants. We basically became each other's academic family.

The influence of this process on my own work has been tremendous. It helped me in making explicit my own methodological

values and developing my own map of the field, which lies at the basis of my 2007 book on *Finding Metaphor in Grammar and Usage.* It shows how linguistic work, or work in the humanities, can be empirical without conflating that with experimental. I am sure it was also instrumental in landing me a big grant for a large research project with four PhD students on metaphor in discourse. In this project, we developed and refined MIP to a more valid and reliable procedure called MIPVU and we applied it to a sample from the British National Corpus which yielded the world's first annotated corpus for metaphor. This then led to another project in which we aim to extend the procedure for verbal metaphor identification to a procedure for visual metaphor identification, currently including a new follow up project for the construction of the world's first visual metaphor database.

Apart from these methodological consequences, it also led to the discovery of the distinction between direct, indirect and implicit metaphor, which in turn led to the distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor use and my proposal for adding communication as a separate dimension to the study of metaphor in language and thought. This is directly connected to my interest in visual metaphor, figurative framing, and to my new ideas about metaphor, embodied cognition and unconscious and conscious processing. These topics I am now collaborating on with young metaphor researchers who are becoming experts in their field.

I would not have been able to develop any of these ideas, had it not been for Pragglejaz, for which I am extremely grateful. That I can pass all these experiences on to the next generation in our Metaphor Lab Summer and Winter Schools on techniques for metaphor identification and analysis makes me very happy.

11. How would you explain to children what you are currently doing?

That depends on their age. To kids under 12 I'd just say I'm a linguist who is interested in how language works for telling stories or having arguments. But to kids in secondary school I'd say that I am interested in how we talk about difficult or abstract things in terms of comparison with much simpler things that we know more about. Then I'd say that

this is interesting because such comparisons are never completely right, and that choosing the right comparison is essential for getting your ideas across in the best way possible.

12. What would you want young people to know about metaphors and their effects?

I'd like them to be aware of the many metaphorical models that are part of our culture, including society and organizations as a family or a body, electricity as water, time as space, love as madness, illness as war or a plague, and so on. I'd then like them to see that a lot of our ordinary language reflects these models and that they lead to entailments that people can use automatically and unthinkingly but also need to be critical about. And finally I'd encourage them to see if they can be critical and creative in their metaphor use and then ask them to take a step back and consider the value of these cross-domain comparisons.

13. Which scientific book are you reading at the moment – and why?

For work I am reading Alan Baddeley's *Working memory, thought, and action*. It is an overview of research on working memory by one of the key players in this area. I am reading it because I think it is essential for models of metaphor processing in discourse. Working memory is the moment when processing comes to a temporary moment of stasis, if that is the right word, yielding a mental representation of whatever it is that people are cognizing. For metaphorical utterances, I make the link with the moment in discourse psychology when a situation model for an utterance has been constructed by the comprehender. Everything taking place before then is unconscious, while the situation model is what we have in our attention (working memory), which in turn is open for introspection and subsequent conscious processing, if that is useful. My main suggestion here is that a lot of metaphor may not lead to representations of the source domain in working memory, which would explain why a lot of metaphor is not open for introspection and conscious elaboration. However, some metaphor clearly is, and this is where deliberateness, framing, and so on all come in.

For pleasure I am reading Tony Judt's *Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945*. It is a brilliant and engaged historical account of everything we need to know as modern citizens and cultured people in contemporary European society. If you want to know where the welfare state came from, how it was deliberately destroyed from the 1980s on, and what happened next, with all the knock on effects on our everyday lives, culture and, yes, science, too — this is the book to read.

14. Which novel are you reading at the moment – and why? What do you like about this novel?

The novel I recently finished was Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the clown*. I am a fan of Rushdie's for his use of language, including metaphor, his encompassing almost Shakespearean vision, his combination of the comic with the tragic, his humor, his compassion, and his intelligence. All of these are to be found in *Shalimar the clown* as well. But *The Satanic Verses* remains my favorite.

15. Which question that is not included here do you find important or maybe even most important?

A question about the development of metaphor studies across the world. I have recently traveled to Ukraine, Russia, and China and am amazed by the interest in metaphor studies and the extent of non-western traditions that we do not know anything about in the west. There are immense linguistic, cultural, academic and material barriers to be brought down here, and I believe that academics in the west have a great responsibility in helping to decrease distances and promote interaction, both by going other places themselves and by hosting visiting students and scholars in their own universities. We all stand to gain a lot.

Gerard Steen

place of work:

from 1 January, 2015, I will work as Professor of Language and Communication in the Dutch Department at the University of Amsterdam

main areas of work:

metaphor studies, discourse analysis, genre analysis, cognitive linguistics, stylistics and poetics

career:

I got my MA degree in English language and literature in 1982, and another MA degree in poetics in 1985, both from the VU University. Then I worked at Utrecht University in English for two years before I started out on my PhD project on Metaphor in Literary Reception in 1987 in the Department of Poetics, back at VU University. I took my degree in May 1992 and got a position as assistant professor at Tilburg University in the Department of Discourse Studies in January 1993. I came back to the English Department at VU University in 2000 as an assistant professor and after some years got a newly founded personal chair, in Language Use and Cognition, and my own research group. In 2010 I founded the Metaphor Lab, taking that with me to a new department in October 2013, where I held the chair in Language and Communication until 31 December 2014.

memberships and functions (selection):

Most recently I became chair of the board of the National Research School in Linguistics, LOT. At VU University I was chair of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, and chair of the Science Committee of the Faculty of Arts. In 2013/14 I served as a member of a committee advising the Rector of the University about the possibility of merging the Arts and Philosophy Faculties into one Humanities Faculty, and in 2012/13 as a member of a national Education Assessment Exercise Committee evaluating the Media Studies and Communication and Information Science programs in all Dutch universities. For five years a was a member of the University Council for Quality Control in

scientific research at the VU, and at roughly the same time I was a member of the Scientific Advisory Board for CAMeRA, an interfaculty research institute at the VU. Some years before that I was chair for three years of the personnel committee of the faculty, the 'parliament' in our organizational structure.

Most important publications (selection):

Steen, G.J. (2013). Deliberate metaphor affords conscious metaphorical cognition. *Journal of Cognitive Semiotics 5* (1-2), 179-197.

Steen, G.J. (2011). The contemporary theory of metaphor—now new and improved! *Review of Cognitive Linguistics 9*(1), 26-64.

Steen, G.J. (2011). Genre between the humanities and the sciences. In M. Callies, W.R. Keller, & A. Lohöfer (Eds.),a *Bi-directionality in the cognitive sciences: Examining the interdisciplinary potential of cognitive approaches in linguistics and literary studies* (pp. 21-42). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Steen, G.J., Dorst, A.G., Herrmann, J.B., Kaal, A.A., Krennmayr, T., Pasma, T. (2010). *A method for linguistic metaphor identification: From MIP to MIPVU.* (Converging Evidence in Language and Communication Research, Vol. 14.) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Steen, G.J. (2009). From linguistic form to conceptual structure in five steps: analyzing metaphor in poetry. In G. Brône & J. Vandaele (Eds.), *Cognitive poetics: Goals, gains and gaps* (pp. 197-226). Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Steen, G.J. (2008). The paradox of metaphor: Why we need a three-dimensional model for metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol, 23*(4), 213-241.

Steen, G.J., Cameron, L.J., Cienki, A.J., Crisp, P., Deignan, A., Gibbs, Raymond W. jr, Grady, J., Kövecses, Z., Low, G.D. & Semino, E. (= Pragglejaz Group) (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol, 22*(1), 1-39.

Steen, G.J. (2007). *Finding metaphor in grammar and usage: A methodological analysis of theory and research.* (Converging Evidence in Language and Communication Research, Vol. 10.) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.