

METAMETAPHORICAL ISSUES

The Death of Dead Metaphor

George Lakoff
Department of Linguistics
University of California, Berkeley

The term "dead metaphor" is a holdover from a traditional folk theory of language that has turned out not to be workable. According to the old theory, the locus of metaphor was language not thought, ordinary everyday language was "literal," and only novel poetic or rhetorical expressions were candidates for being metaphors. Metaphorical "life" was seen in poetic novelty alone, and mundane unpoetic language supported no metaphorical life. A "dead" metaphor was defined relative to that theory as a linguistic expression that had once been novel and poetic, but had since become part of mundane conventional language, the cemetery of creative thought.

As we saw in this column (I,4, 000-000), the term "literal" is a cluster concept, defined relative to the old theory. When empirical research showed the old theory to be wrong, the term "literal" split. The four senses making up the cluster had to be distinguished, and one could no longer use "literal" in its old overly simplistic sense in discussions of metaphor.

Like "literal", "dead metaphor" has been defined in a theory-dependent way. As that theory dissolves under the scrutiny of empirical research, the meaning of "dead metaphor" cannot remain constant. What were called dead metaphors in the old theory have turned out to be a host of quite disparate phenomena, including those metaphors that are most alive -- the ones that we use constantly in everyday thought. If one wants to keep the term "dead metaphor", it will have to come to mean something very different in contemporary theories.

To see where the problem lies, we need to consider some examples. Let us begin with a clear case, something that would be a dead metaphor in any theory, old or new: the word *pedigree*. The word comes from the Middle English *pedegru*, which in turn came from the Old French *pie de grue*, which meant "foot of a crane." Why foot of a crane? The answer is that family-tree diagrams of period used a three-line claw-shaped mark to indicate family lineage. The family-tree diagram looked like a crane's foot. What was the metaphor? Conceptually, it was a mapping from one conventional image (a crane's foot) to another (a family-tree diagram). The term for the source image, *pie de grue*, was used for the target image, the family-tree diagram.

At the time this metaphor was alive, it was a one-shot metaphor, not a systematic one. It was used for one term only. It did not map one complex conceptual structure onto another, as rich metaphors do. It merely mapped one conventional mental image onto another. There was no whole system of source-domain terminology mapped onto a corresponding system of target-domain terminology, as for example in the LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor discussed in this column (I,3, 215-225); only one expression from the source domain was used. One image-mapping, one linguistic mapping, and nothing else.

In present-day English, neither the image-mapping nor the linguistic mapping exists. We no longer have a vivid conventionalized mental image of a crane's foot. The source image is dead. Because the source image is dead, there can be no image-mapping. Thus we do not see family-tree diagrams as crane's feet. Moreover, we no longer use the Old French term *pie de grue* in English to mean crane's foot. The source domain term is also dead and gone. Because the source image is gone and the source terminology is gone, there can be no image-mapping and no terminology mapping. Both aspects of the old metaphorical mapping are no longer with us. If anything deserves to be called a dead metaphor, *pedigree* does, because it is not alive in any respect. Not only are the mappings gone, but the source domain image and terminology are both gone.

But the existence of a clear case of something we might want to call a dead metaphor, does not mean that the term as it was traditionally used can continue to be used in the same way. For example, let us take the case of a live image-mapping. The word *dunk* has "plunge into water" as its central sense. There is also a specialized version of this sense which means to dip a pastry of some kind (typically a doughnut or oreo cookie) into a glass or cup of liquid that one is drinking. There is a conventional image associated with this sense. In the image, the pastry is placed above the rim of the cup or glass and dipped in past the rim with a casual wrist movement. There is a metaphorical extension of this sense of dunk to basketball. The extension is based on an image-mapping: The rim of the cup or glass is mapped onto the rim of the basket, the pastry is mapped onto the basketball. The word *dunk*, which describes the action in the dipping image, describes the corresponding action in the basketball image. For most speakers of contemporary English, both images are alive and the relationship is clear.

What we have here is a case of a one-shot metaphor, in which the cross-domain mapping is a mapping of one conventional image onto another. It is not a very interesting metaphor. There is no mapping of one complex knowledge structure onto another, and consequently no metaphorical inferences to be drawn. It affects only one word. Yet it is quite recent and very much alive -- not at all like *pedigree*. Yet on the traditional sense of "dead metaphor", *dunk* would qualify, since it is not novel or poetic, but rather a part of our conventional everyday language. The rubric "dead metaphor" covers both centuries old historical cases and current conventional cases equally. It does not allow for the distinction.

The term "dead metaphor" also covers other kinds of cases. Take the words *comprehend* and *grasp*. *Comprehend* comes from the Latin *comprehendere*, which in turn was formed from *com*, meaning "together", plus *prehendere* meaning "seize" or "grasp". At the time the Latin term came into being, Latin presumably had the conventional metaphor that UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING. In Latin, *comprehendere* meant what *comprehend* means now, to understand, or as the American Heritage Dictionary puts it, "to grasp mentally."

Today we still have the conventional UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING metaphor in our conceptual system. We still understand understanding itself as a kind of mental grasping, and we use the word *grasp* to mean "understand" in sentences like *He still can't quite grasp the basic ideas of quantum mechanics*. This is not just a matter of a single word. We also have expressions like *get a handle on* and *get away from* (as in *Just as I started to get a handle on the main idea, it got away from me*), *catch* (as in *I caught all the subtleties of the argument*), *escape* (as in *The subtleties of argument escaped him*), *over x's head* (as in *The main points*

went over his head), go right by x (as in *What he said went right by me*), elude (as in *That theorem has eluded me for years*), and so on. These are instances of the same general UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING metaphor:

Source domain: physical space

Target domain: thought

objects - ideas

grasping - understanding

failing to grasp - failing to understand

This metaphorical mapping is conceptual in nature and used in part to understand what understanding is. This metaphor is systematic and very much alive; it is a conventional part of our conceptual systems. Conventional living modes of thought which are used every day are anything but "dead."

It is extremely important to distinguish metaphors that are conventional from metaphors that do not exist anymore. The conceptual mapping from crane's feet to family tree diagrams does not exist any more. The mapping from objects to ideas and from grasping to understanding does exist and is part of our normal mode of metaphorical thought.

In accordance with the conceptual metaphor just stated, the word *grasp* meaning to hold onto an object is mapped onto mental grasping, that is, understanding. The word *comprehend* once worked that way in Latin, but does no longer. In English, it does not mean to hold onto; it just means, as the American Heritage Dictionary notes without comment, to grasp mentally. It does not take part in the mapping; it attaches to metaphorical grasping, not to physical grasping.

We can now begin to see where the traditional concept of dead metaphor fails us. It cannot distinguish four disparate cases:

pedigree: Source domain structure (image of crane's foot) is absent; conceptual mapping (from crane's foot image to family tree image) is absent; source domain terminology (*pedigree* meaning crane's foot) is absent; linguistic mapping (from source domain terminology to target domain terminology) is absent.

dunk: Source domain structure (image of pastry-dipping) is present; conceptual mapping (from pastry-dipping image to basketball image) is present; source domain terminology (*dunk* meaning dip) is present; linguistic mapping (from source domain terminology to target domain terminology) is present.

comprehend: Source domain structure (knowledge about grasping objects) is present; conceptual mapping (from grasping objects to mentally grasping ideas) is present, systematic, and conventional; source domain terminology (*comprehend* meaning physically hold on to) is absent; linguistic mapping is absent, but definition is given in terms of the target of conceptual mapping (mental grasping).

grasp: Source domain structure (knowledge about grasping objects) is present; conceptual mapping (from grasping objects to mentally grasping ideas) is present, systematic, and conventional; source domain terminology (*grasp* meaning physically hold on to) is present; linguistic mapping is present.

Since none of these is novel or poetic, the traditional theory would lump them all together as dead metaphors. An adequate theory must distinguish conceptual mappings from linguistic mappings, conventional mappings from novel mappings, systematic mappings from one-shot mappings, and currently-existing mappings

from mappings that ceased to exist centuries ago. The theory in which "dead metaphor" was defined does not make such distinctions. Anything that looks metaphorical but isn't novel is "dead metaphor" in that theory, even the liveliest of conventional cases.

On the whole, I think it would be good terminological practice either to avoid using the term "dead metaphor" ("historical metaphor is more accurate but less vivid) or to reserve it for cases like *pedigree*. If the term is going to be used at all, it is extremely important to distinguish dead metaphor from conventional metaphor, from one-shot living metaphors, and from cases like *comprehend*, which are defined only in terms of the target of a live conceptual metaphor.

If nothing else, it is important to be aware of the theory-dependent status of traditional terms like "literal" and "dead metaphor." They carry old and demonstrably false theories with them and, if not carefully used, they will presuppose those old theories and stifle discussion of contemporary research.