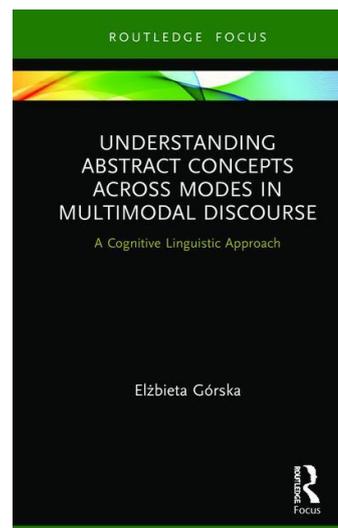


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Understanding Abstract Concepts across Modes in Multimodal Discourse

A Cognitive Linguistic Approach

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Review by Elena Mattei

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The fields of metaphor studies, cognitive linguistics and multimodal discourse have given rise, in the last decades, to what we know today as “Multimodal Metaphor” (Forceville 2009), which is rooted in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), a theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson. This theory underpins the definition of metaphorical communication as “[...] a mode of thought” (Lakoff 1993, 210), i.e. the realization of conceptualizations not only by means of the verbal mode but also by other expressive means. These “means of expression,” referred to as “modes” by multimodal theory, are usually understood as organized sets of resources, which are shaped by society and whose use might change according to cultural context (Kress 2010, 79). Metaphorical and abstract thinking, by being imaginative by nature and unconsciously culturally inborn, can therefore be expressed in any semiotic mode alongside verbal language, such as static and moving imagery, gestures, sound. Forceville’s new conceptualization of figurative communication suggests that multimodal metaphors, in order to be defined as such, should express bodily experience (metaphor source) and the concept (metaphor target) through different modes. He claims that humans comprehend abstract concepts in terms of concrete concepts. For example, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY¹ seeks to make the concept of LIFE

¹ The use of small capital letters reproduces the intention of scholars in metaphor studies to indicate conceptual entities and the domains of both metaphors and metonymies. Throughout her book, Górska deploys the same typographical technique and extends it to image schemas and image-schematic concepts. The same distinction can be found in this review.

intelligible through the more concrete experience of JOURNEY and the intrinsically triggered idea of path with a destination which, in metaphorical discourse, represents a feature of the source “mapped” onto the target domain (20).

The book by Górska fits into this theoretical framework perfectly and integrates specific cognitive linguistic approaches into a multimodal research study of cartoons by the Polish artist Janusz Kapusta. Drawing upon image schema theory, CMT, multimodal metaphor theory, the dynamic approach to metaphor and a multimodal approach to metonymy, the author explores the spatialization of abstract concepts in verbo-pictorial aphorisms, aiming to widen and enrich the contemporary field of multimodal metaphorical thinking through an image-schematic cognitive approach. The core of her work, as she states in the *Preface*, and which is discussed throughout the first chapter, lies in analyzing how these verbal and pictorial modes combine to decipher those abstract concepts which underlie human knowledge. In order to do that, she draws on cognitive linguistics’ image schema theory as the starting point for her investigation and demonstrates how visual thinking is image-schematic and figurative (both metaphorical and metonymic) by nature. She focuses in particular on two quintessential experiences of human life, namely emotions and life. To these abstract concepts she devotes the central chapters (chapter 2 and 3), whereas the first and the fourth correspond to the introduction and the conclusion. The aim of this review is to shed light on the innovative contributions the author brings to the literature; therefore, it will focus on the discussion of the book’s introduction (Chapter 1). The second and third chapters show the application of Górska’s new theoretical framework by providing the analysis of 26 cartoons by Kanusta. The cartoons of the collected corpus deal with the concepts of emotions and life and deserve attentive reading as well. The author’s analysis of these cartoons in fact succeeds in unveiling the novelty of abstract production and interpretation of these shared human experiences. The conclusion, finally, serves the purpose of summarizing both the assumptions and inferences made throughout the book and indicates paths for future analysis.

In the opening part of her book, Górska outlines the theoretical framework underpinning her analysis and provides details of the methodology adopted to choose and analyze the data. She structures this chapter by first introducing the notion of image schemas and of Forceville’s multimodal approach to metaphor; she then describes her data and shows her theoretical approach at work. What is really worth describing, in order to understand the complexity and the novelty of her research, is the concept of verbo-pictorial aphorisms and image schemas and their interdependency in producing and understanding abstract metaphorical thinking. Aphorisms are concise, memorable expressions of a general truth that “provide a novel

understanding” (1) of abstract concepts and which, in this case, represent a multimodal meaning puzzle “whose solution itself might be intellectually and aesthetically satisfying” (10). Górska considers aphorisms as those expressions which can provide access to the visualization of the concept in the mind. Accordingly, multimodal figurative language can lead to a better comprehension of abstract entities. Multimodal metaphors, the most widely used and coherent tools in this context, are here said to be constructed not only through different modes, but also with the help of image schemas. As a matter of fact, Górska argues that image schemas are patterns of thought that are shaped by our bodily experience throughout our life and that affect both our experiences and their conceptualization. In other words, they are spatial and body logics that enable us to understand what we perceive (4).

The author then considers, in order to illustrate the emergence of image schemas and their bodily motivation, the NEAR-FAR schema. The latter supports the conceptualization of emotional/physical closeness by unconsciously reminding us of the infant’s primary experience of physical proximity—and intimacy—with the mother. Physical proximity in infants’ experience, in fact, is strongly correlated with affection, emotional warmth and is part of the infant-mother bond, healthy attachment that lies the foundations of any other type of relationship. Through this fundamental experience, consequently, people become able to understand the secondary meaning of “closeness” and to correlate closeness and distance with similarity and difference (2). Again, in BALANCE schemas, the conceptual (and I would say *metaphorical*) meaning of balance is memorized and grasped through the infant’s bodily experience of struggling to stay erect. BALANCE, along with other concepts such as FORCE or SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schemas, which emerge from the experience of locomotion, are thus not learnt by heart or with our mind but with the body. These patterns of embodied experience are *preconceptual* structures of sensory, *perceptual* experiences, which are inevitably also socio-culturally situated. They are in fact interpreted, codified differently by each society and become shared cultural models for the understanding of reality. For example, the differing interaction of people from distinct cultures with containers—such as baskets—led to a different conceptualization of containment, which resulted in a different acquisition of the CONTAINMENT schema and logic (5). TIME also, to mention another example, is interpreted differently according to the culture; it is seen in fact as either a circular or a linear movement by, respectively, Eastern and Western cultures.

Following this line of reasoning, multimodal image-schematic metaphors that structure, according to Górska, Kanusta’s cartoons, take advantage of both image schemas and mode affordances to portray the essence of a concept in the audience’s mind. They evoke an image-

schema and its possible “meaning” mappings as their source domain, usually through the pictorial mode, to better “concretize”—make accessible to our understanding—the target domain, which is the *verbalized* abstract concept. They therefore have the advantage of establishing multimodal ties which are experientially motivated (17). Examples can be found in primary metaphors, such as INTERPERSONAL/SOCIAL DISTANCE (target domain) IS PHYSICAL DISTANCE (source domain). This primary metaphor aims to reflect people’s tendency to stay close to those perceived as similar or emotionally closer and to adopt their behavior, therefore becoming even more *similar* to them (7).

In the second part of the introduction the author describes the size and composition of her corpus (twenty-six cartoons of the same author published in the Polish weekly *Plus Minus*) and further frames her analysis by explaining the dynamic approach to metaphor. This theoretical assumption sees the exploitation in metaphorical communication of different mode affordances as “metaphoricity activators,” which make a metaphor more complex but also more understandable and attractive (11). This means that metaphors’ source and target domains might be “cued,” activated, monomodally or multimodally (potentially expanding Forceville’s conception of multimodal metaphors) and that this metaphor’s “remapping” can lead to novel understanding of the abstract concepts conveyed (44, 48, 69, 70, 77). As a result, monomodal metaphors are considered neither “waking” nor “explicit” and therefore neither effective nor attractive. Finally, the author focuses on another key aspect of figurative discourse: metonymy. According to her findings, multimodal metonymies in the analyzed cartoons play the fundamental role of overcoming the staticity and abstractism of multimodal aphorisms by providing mental access to specific metaphors’ source domains. For example, the metonymy PATH FOR MOTION (part for whole) manages not only to support an image schema such as SOURCE-PATH-GOAL and metaphors that identify events, behaviors in life with physical movement, but also to instill in the audience the idea of dynamicity which, in a static image, is difficult to realize (13, 20). This means that not only metaphors but also metonymies do represent a visual and *multimodal* resource that can reproduce “abstract discourse” and which can become an object of further study for cognitive linguistics and multimodal research.

In conclusion, this book on metaphor construal contributes to enriching the fields of multimodality and cognitive studies by demonstrating how the interplay between modes is carefully designed and better explains abstract concepts. The multimodal symbolic condensation of abstract thinking through image-schematizations of metaphors’ source domains definitely offers insight into how beliefs, shared human experiences are concretely “graspable,” evoking and somehow “attention-grabbing.” This work could therefore be considered to occupy

a novel position in multimodal metaphor studies and be applied to a wide range of fields, including advertising discourse. However, as also the author states in the conclusion, the qualitative results offered by this work should be accompanied by a larger corpus study and empirical testing in order to become a reliable resource to draw upon for further analysis. On the one hand, a quantitative multimodal study would enable the identification of image-schematic patterns of use, if any, in the genre at issue and possibly in other genres that involve verbo-pictorial modes in metaphorical communication. On the other hand, empirical evidence resulting from a mixed methodological approach and directly involving a potential audience would encourage the detection of patterns of interpretation and reception of this kind of communication. The development of both surveys and interviews would also ensure reliability in the assessment of both the presence and the effect of “attention-grabbing” elements. In other words, the inclusion of these methods in the current or in future study would help concretize, generalize and reinforce the assumption of multimodality pervasiveness in contemporary communication and assert the presence of metaphorical discourse as a common but creative pattern of expression. Górska’s book surely represents a starting point for this academic *journey*.

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