

6-20-2011

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Recommended Citation

Tovey, Mark (1995) "Spatial Metaphors as Linguistic Primitives: A Comparison of UP-DOWN Metaphors in Three Languages," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 16.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol2/iss1/16>

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Keywords

spatial metaphors, up-down metaphors, primitive

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Spatial Metaphors as Linguistic Primitives: A Comparison of UP-DOWN Metaphors in Three Languages

Mark Tovey

INTRODUCTION¹

It is only relatively recently that linguists have begun to consider metaphors in a cognitive context (Kittay 1987:1-2). The first important, and still most often cited, study in the field is *Metaphors We Live By*, written by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, published in 1980. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are convinced that the elusiveness of meaning and the overlapping domains of metaphors have much more to do with each other than meets the eye. They wrote *Metaphors We Live By* with the conviction that metaphor is not only "pervasive in everyday life", but that "our ordinary conceptual system ... is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Kittay 1987:3), by which they mean that "most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts" (Kittay 1987:56).

In order to understand language in the first place there must presumably be some concepts which are understood directly, without resorting to metaphor (Kittay 1987:56). These, they suggest, most likely derive from simple spatial concepts, such as (using their convention of capitalization) UP and DOWN, since these are constantly reinforced by our biological programming, erect posture, and experience of gravity, generating systematic associations in our language (Kittay 1987:56). Lakoff and Johnson are not alone. Roger Shepard devoted a paper to similar claims, concluding that "the most basic and powerful innate intuitions and principles underlying verbal and nonverbal thought ... may well be those governing the relations ... of objects in space" (Shepard 1981:339). A useful distinction between these high-level concepts, and more basic, atomic concepts, is provided by Sperber's Law. It holds that problematic (not well understood) concepts tend to be expressed in metaphors, whereas unproblematic (well understood) concepts become vehicles for other, less well understood concepts (MacKay 1986:94). Spatial orientations, as part of the defining fabric of our existence, are excellent candidates for unproblematic concepts.

SPATIAL METAPHORS

Lakoff and Johnson mention several types of spatial orientation (FRONT-BACK, IN-OUT, NEAR-FAR) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:56), however the one they treat in detail is UP-DOWN (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:14-21). They look at ten different ways that UP-DOWN metaphors are used in English, giving a number of example sentences for each, with categories like HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN (You're in high spirits.) or MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN (If you're too hot, turn the heat down) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:15-16).

¹Mark Tovey was brought into the editorial process after his paper had already been selected for publication. To ensure that there was no conflict of interest, a policy was maintained that all editorial decisions regarding this paper, from selection to final proofreading, be made by Toby Cockcroft.

With each of these, Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:14-21) offer a plausible explanation as to why we structure concepts around UP and DOWN in this fashion.

What is of particular interest about Lakoff and Johnson's explanations is that they attribute seven of the ten to purely physical causes (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:15-16), attributing the other three to both physical and social causes (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:16-17). If a metaphoric structure were grounded entirely on a physical or biological basis, it should also be reasonably stable cross-culturally. Having access to a professional translator and interpreter fluent in both Serbo-Croatian and German, I compared a sampling of the English UP-DOWN metaphors used as illustrations by Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:14-21) with the metaphoric phrases in Serbo-Croatian and German which come closest to them. To achieve this, I instructed the translator to prefer, in trying to approximate the meaning of the English phrase, metaphors to non-metaphors, in order to see the metaphoric alternatives, should the phrase not fall into an UP/DOWN category. The results, accompanied by literal English translations of the Serbo-Croatian and German phrases, can be found in the Appendix.

Of the ten categories surveyed, only one, VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN (one of the cultural and physical categories), can be said to have precisely the same metaphorical equivalents in both languages, on a phrase by phrase basis. That is to say that all other categories contain at least one phrase which either a) can't be rendered metaphorically, b) uses a different metaphor, or c) uses a metaphor arguably within the same conceptual category, but which doesn't correspond exactly with the English usage. Significantly, when the only way of rendering the idea metaphorically doesn't employ the original rhetorical idea ('high quality work' becoming 'first-class work' or 'under his control' becoming 'in his power') the metaphor is consistent with our ideas of how metaphors should behave. Even the most foreign-sounding to our ears, 'socially he is behind me' causes us to automatically make the appropriate connection -- we also associate behind with below.

More importantly, none of the translated phrases which were expressed in UP-DOWN terms go the 'wrong way', in other words, no DOWN metaphors were encountered in translation where an UP was to be found in the original, and vice versa. This means that within the scope of the data I have here, spatial usages of metaphor cross-culturally are completely consistent, suggesting them as instances of atomic, unproblematic concepts. Though further investigation using non-Indo-European languages is clearly necessary, the usefulness of present result is strengthened significantly by the fact that, although German and English share Germanic roots, the German here does not share any more metaphors with English than Slavic Serbo-Croatian. In tallying the number of metaphors in which each language used the same metaphor paradigm as English, each was found to share precisely the same number: thirteen.

APPENDIX

UP-DOWN metaphors in English, kindly translated into Serbo-Croatian and German by Mrs. Edith Tovey. The organizing categories and most examples are taken from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

Format of appendix:

[ORGANIZING CONCEPT OF METAPHORS]

[Original English phrase]

[Serbo-Croatian translation of English phrase]

[German translation of English phrase]

'[literal English translation of Serbo-Croatian]'

'[literal English translation of German]'

HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN

I am depressed

ja sam deprimiran
ich bin deprimiert

'I am depressed'
'I am depressed'

I am feeling up

ja se dobro osjeam
Ich fühle mich gut

'I feel well'
'I feel well'

I am feeling down

Osjećam se utucen
Ich fühle mich niedergeschlagen

'I feel dejected'
'I feel downcast'

My spirits rose

moje raspoloženje se poboljšalo
Meine Stimmung erhob sich

'My mood improved'
'My mood lifted'

My spirits sank

moje raspoloženje se pogorsalo
Meine Stimmung erniedrigte sich

'My mood got worse'
'My mood sank'

CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN

I am up already

vec sam ustao
Ich bin schon auf

'I have already got up'
'I am already up'

I dropped off to sleep

zaspao sam
Ich schlief ein

'I went to sleep'
'I went into sleep'

HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN

He is at the peak of his health

on puca od zdravlja
er ist in bester gesundheit

'he is bursting with health'
'he is in the best of health'

His health is declining

zdravlje mu se pogorsava
seine Gesundheit geht hinunter

'his health is getting worse'
'his health is going down'

CONTROL OR FORCE IS UP; SUBJECT TO CONTROL IS DOWN**I am on top of the situation**

Ja situaciju imam pod kontrolom
 Ich habe die Situation in der Hand
 'I have the situation in hand.'

'I have the situation under control'

I am under his control

Ja sam pod njegovom kontrolom
 Ich bin in seiner Gewalt

'I am under his control'
 'I am in his power'

MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN**Prices rose**

cjene su se povisile
 die Preise erhöhten sich

prices have risen'
 'prices became higher'

The rate of inflation fell

stopa inflacije je pala
 die Inflationsrate ist gesunken

'rate of inflation fell'
 'the inflation rate has sunk'

The stock market jumped

berza se povisila
 die Börse stieg

'the stock market went up'
 'the stock market climbed'¹

FORESEEABLE FUTURE EVENTS ARE UP (AND AHEAD)**What's coming up this week?**

sta dolazi ove nedelje?
 Was kommt diese Woche?

'what is coming this week?'
 'what is coming this week?'

LAKOFF AND JOHNSON ATTRIBUTE THE FOLLOWING TO SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL CAUSES:

HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN**Working towards the top**

radi da dostigne vrh
 arbeiten um den Gipfel zu erreichen

'working to reach the top'
 'working to reach the top'

At the lowest rung of the ladder

na najnižem stepenu ljestava
 auf der untersten Stufe der Leiter

'on the lowest rung of the ladder'
 'on the lowest rung of the ladder'

He is my social inferior

on je socialno nizi od mene
 Gesellschaftlich steht er mir nach

'he is socially lower than me'
 'socially he is behind me'

GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN**He does high quality work**

On radi prvoklasni posao.
 Er macht qualitätsarbeit

'He does first-class work'
 'He does quality work'

He sank in my estimation

On se ponizio u mojm ocima
 Er war in meinen Augen gesunken

'He was lowered in my eyes'
 'He sank in my eyes'

¹There seem to be no phrases which represent the discontinuity implied in 'jumped.'

VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN

She has high standards

ona ima visoki standard
sie hat ein hohes Niveau

'she has a high standard'
'she has a high standard'

You can't get lower than that

ne ide nize
niedriger geht es nicht

'it does not go any lower'
'lower it does not go'

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN

The discussion fell to the emotional level ...

Discusija je postala emocionalna
Die Discussion wurde gefühlsbetont

'The discussion became emotional'
'The discussion became emotional'

... but I raised it back to the rational plane.

ali sam je ja opet vratio na racionalni nivo
aber ich habe sie wieder auf das Racionale zurückgebracht

'but I brought it back to a rational level'
'but I brought it back to rationality'

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