

Metaphors Goffman Theorizes By: A Cognitive Semantic Analysis

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ゴフマン理論におけるメタファーの諸相について: 認知意味論からの一考察

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Abstract

The writings of Ervin Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist renowned for his seminal studies of face-to-face communication and related rituals of social interaction, offer a kaleidoscope of metaphorical representations in his theorizing of relevant concepts created and elaborated to probe subtle facets of human interaction. Although his works have undergone rigorous academic scrutiny by sociologists and linguists over the years, scant attention has been given to the question of how such metaphorical conceptions may have helped to shape or frame his theories of social interaction. This paper is a preliminary attempt to unravel the intricate web of such metaphors spun by this giant of 20th-century sociology from the perspective of cognitive semantics, using “conceptual metaphors” like SOCIAL INTERACTIONS ARE THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES as possible points of departure for the analysis at hand. It concludes by discussing the possibility of positing the “specific-generic” axis and the “conscious-unconscious” axis for deciphering the metaphorical underpinnings of Goffman’s theoretical approaches.

1. Introduction

Ervin Goffman was no doubt a master of metaphors. His incisive analyses of everyday interaction were on some occasions methodologically undergirded by particular clusters of metaphors as theoretical frameworks for interpretation, and were on other occasions adorned with vivid metaphorical imagery of particular aspects of situated human behavior. In this paper, I intend to retrace, roughly but not necessarily chronologically, a small part of the trajectory that Goffman is believed to have traversed in his metaphorical modeling of social interaction, and point out some of the implications that such a path—presumably very much strategic and methodological on his part, and yet simultaneously subconscious—might have had for his view of situated social interaction. In short, this is an attempt, albeit quite fragmented, to take a glimpse into a fraction of Goffman’s theoretical “career” as well as his “cognitive unconscious” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 9-15). My working hypothesis is that his use of different metaphors in formulating models of the intricate workings

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of face-to-face interaction mirrors a fundamental shift in his focus of theoretical attention from phenomena subject to conscious (or intentional) control and management to phenomena that pertain to largely unconscious background assumptions that regulate human behavior in public². Although any comprehensive treatment of such metaphors adopted in his vast and densely packed texts is far beyond the purview of this paper, I hope to shed light on some of the less illuminated aspects of his systematic use of metaphors.

2. Goffman's Metaphors and Their Analysis

In his *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman adopted probably one of his most conspicuous metaphorical models: the social world as a theater (i.e., SOCIAL INTERACTIONS ARE THEATRICAL (STAGE) PERFORMANCES, to use the notational convention of Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It stands to reason, then, that most of the key concepts are derived directly and indirectly from the domain of dramaturgy, including “(discrepant) roles”, “character”, “front”, “front/back regions”, “a guarded passageway”, and “teams” (as stage performance coconspirators of sort). The basic assumption here is that an individual, in the presence of others, tries to “control the impression they receive of the situation” (1959, p. 15). Here the individual is conceived as an interactant who can exert some control over his/her action to adapt to a definition of the situation putatively projected by others in immediate presence, as can be surmised from the pervasive use of the word control³. This apparent focus on intentional aspects of “impression management” lends itself readily to systematic analogical projections to theoretical performances, many aspects of which are carefully scripted and choreographed to manipulate the impression they have on the audience⁴.

This explicitly metaphorical model of interaction put forward in Goffman (1959), however, gives way later to models of interaction that still contain similar analogical extensions but are not confined in their formulations to particular domains of human experience, such as theater, as Goffman's focus of attention shifts to more ritualistic aspects of social interaction wherein “rules” of conduct are depicted as constraints on how individuals behave in the presence of others (e.g., Goffman 1963a, 1967, and 1971). Such constraints present themselves not as a result of active and intentional manipulations of impression by performers but as group-sanctioned background assumptions. As partial linguistic evidence, the word rule is used at least 102 times in *Behavior in Public Places* (1963a) and at least 71 times in *Interaction Ritual* (1967), while the word assumption is used at least 18 times and 12 times in those works, respectively. Given this shift, some of the salient metaphors employed along these lines include: “membrane” (1961b, p. 65); “equilibrium of interaction” (1963a, p. 7); “involvement contour” (1963a, p. 18); “interaction tonus” (1963a, p. 25); “relationship wedge” (1963a, p. 5); “a line” (as a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which an individual expresses his/her view of the situation) (1967, p. 5);

² It should be noted, however, that this “conscious-unconscious” distinction is not intended as a dichotomous demarcation, but rather as a continuum that accommodates various levels of consciousness in relative terms.

³ In Goffman (1959), the word control appears at least 49 times, according to a raw frequency count derived by using the “SEARCH INSIDE” function on www.amazon.com as a rough approximation to a simple corpus analysis of the entire book. Any other frequency counts that are reported in this paper are also based on the same procedure.

⁴ It is worth noting that Goffman (1959) did seem to take into account some unconscious and/or subconscious aspects of face-to-face interaction, most notably in his analysis of two different kinds of sign activity involved in the expressive nature of a performance: expression given and expression “given off” (p. 2). The notion of “giving off” clearly addresses less intentional layers of impression management and this unconsciousness connotation in the phrase may be traced to the kind of unconscious metaphorical mapping signaled by the preposition “off”, a mapping that underlies our metaphorical conceptualization of what Tyler and Evans (2003) call a “protoscene” signaled by the preposition.

“traffic rules of social interaction” (1967, p. 12); “ritual (dis)equilibrium” (1967, p. 19); “ritual code” (1967, p. 32); “interaction ethology” (1971, x); “a vehicular unit” (1971, p. 6); “body gloss” (1971, p. 11); “the stall” (1971, p. 32); “the sheath” (1971, p. 38); etc.

The list may appear very much arbitrary, but we can attempt to tease out some levels of systematicity in the use of these metaphors. In metaphor theory widely accepted by cognitive semanticists, particularly the variety espoused by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), a metaphorical expression is viewed as a linguistic manifestation of systematic projections, or “mappings”, from one conceptual domain (i.e., the “source” domain) to another (the “target” domain)⁵. For instance, when Goffman talks about “traffic rules of social interaction” (1967, p. 12), some cross-domain mappings like the following are presumed to be taking place in the minds of readers, from the source domain of road traffic to the target domain of social interaction: “cars” → “people” ; “traffic rules/regulations” → “assumed constraints on social interaction” ; “traffic rule violations” → “infractions of such constraints” ; etc. On this view of metaphors, certain systematic correspondences between elements in two distinct domains are thus assumed to obtain. It would be useful, then, to observe how some of the metaphors in the brief list of Goffman’s metaphors presented above might be categorized by virtue of the different statuses of their source domains.

One striking observation is that the levels of conceptual specificity for the source domains of those metaphors that appear in Goffman’s expositions seem to notch higher (i.e., become more specific in the hierarchy of conceptual categorization) as the areas of social interaction being scrutinized by Goffman shift from phenomena relatively more amenable to intentional control to phenomena less accessible to such control. This observed correlation between the specific-generic axis and the conscious-unconscious axis is illustrated in the following box (Fig. 1). The pattern seems to hold for many instance of metaphor in Goffman’s writings, but it should at the same time be noted that this correlation is at best a loose one, and it is probably more accurate to call it a tendency. This is not surprising given the relatively rich internal structure found in domain-specific metaphorical mappings, for concepts higher up in the specificity hierarchy contain more elements within those concepts. For instance, the domain of theater evokes such notions as “audience”, “stage management”, “performers”, “backstage activities”, and so on, while the more schematic domain of topology evokes only certain spatial configurations, such as “contours”. This conceptual richness paves the way for the use of such domain-specific metaphors as (mostly heuristic) theoretical models of social interaction, whereas domain-free schematic metaphors do not constitute such models per se, although they pervade most analyses under any theoretical models.

This hypothesis seems to hold with regard to *Frame Analysis* (1974), which deals mainly with the kinds of background knowledge individuals bring into play in order to make sense of what is happening in his/her commingling presence with others as a sanctioned reality—in short, “frames”.

⁵ This version of cognitive metaphor theory, known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in cognitive linguistics, has come under a number of criticisms, both from within the cognitive linguistics community, and without, for it apparently fails to capture certain phenomena at the appropriate levels of conceptualization. For instance, the typology of metaphors offered in the early version of CMT did not account for a certain class of “embodied” metaphors that seem to be based on everyday experiential correlations, rather than analogical cross-domain projections, including, inter alia, the famous MORE IS UP metaphor (cf. Grady, 1997a, b, 1999, 2005). Furthermore, the two-domain mapping mechanism does not seem to explain well some of the examples that require creative online construction of conceptual correspondences, as seen in such examples as This surgeon is a butcher (Grady et al., 1999, pp. 103-106) and Grim Reaper as a representation of death (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 291-295). These examples seem to call for multiple-domain cross-mappings, a strong piece of evidence to support Fauconnier and Turner’s Conceptual Blending theory, which involves selective mappings among multiple “mental spaces” and their blends.

The word frame itself is very much schematic and frames certainly involve largely unconscious computations of copresent others' intentions (including an involvement contour, or predictable highs and lows of involvement levels) with regard to the individual' s immediate surroundings.

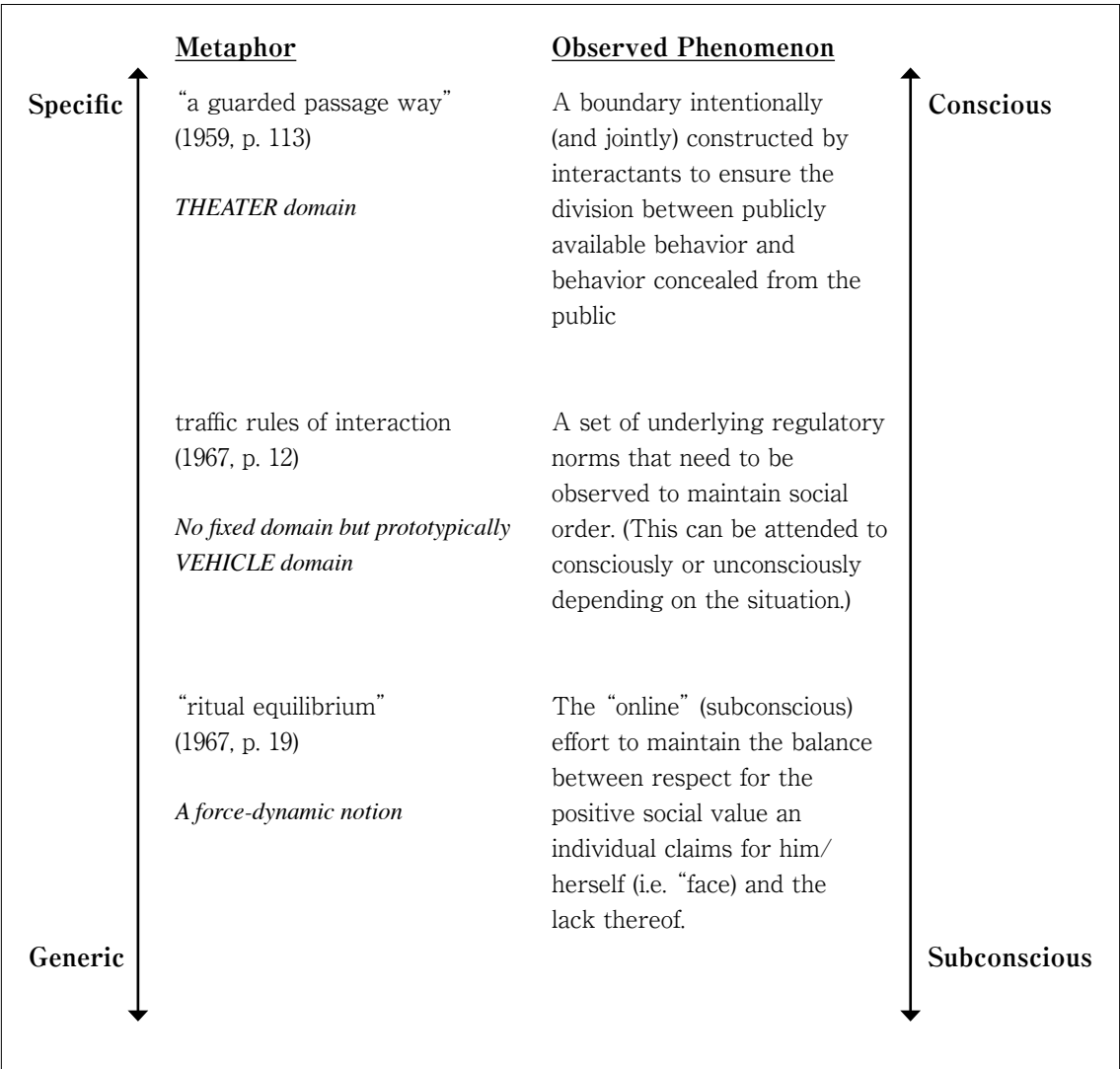


Figure 1: An illustration of correlation between specific-generic and conscious-unconscious axes.

3. Concluding remarks

It may very well be the case that the apparent proclivity on the part of Goffman to employ more schematic varieties of metaphors in explicating phenomena seemingly less subject to conscious control is merely the consequence of how certain areas of experience encompassing such phenomena under examination are elusive to conscious awareness and attentional focus, and thus linguistic manifestations. It is nevertheless worth pointing out that the apparent correlation between types of experience and types of metaphorical understandings apparently exhibited in the writings of Goffman seem to be real enough to impinge on the entire map of theoretical characterizations of

social interaction phenomena that he draws. And even though those areas of experience that are less accessible to conscious awareness do not seem to facilitate easy linguistic realizations, it is important to note that they can be brought under analysis with the use of such expressions motivated by schematic-level metaphors.

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