

The Experiential Foundations of Metaphors for Society: Metaphorical Analogy and the Personification of Society

Benjamin K. Bergen
University of California at Berkeley

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Grady (1997 and To appear), and Lakoff and Johnson (1997) have suggested that all conceptual metaphors must be grounded either in a co-occurrence of experience between the two domains of a mapping or through the unification of primary metaphors which are themselves experientially grounded. Society is a unique testing ground for the theory of primary metaphors because it is a complex and abstract concept which arises late in human development and is highly contested. An investigation of the motivation of some social metaphors, such as SOCIETY IS AN AUTHORITY FIGURE, SOCIETY IS A PARENT, SOCIETY IS A JUDGE, SOCIETY IS A NURTURER, and SOCIETY IS A CREATOR, yields a surprising and previously undetected result: the personification of society with respect to authority over the individual can be shown to derive from an extension from the primary experience of submission to authority or nurturance, an extension which arises due to ambient activation of the source domain whenever the target domain is active. Rather than being a normal case of cognitive metaphor, this is a special type of cognitive phenomenon, one which will be henceforth referred to as metaphorical analogy.

From a very early age, children feel the subjective experiential effects of non-social authorities: the authority of the parent or guardian, or of older siblings or peers, and later on, the authority of institutionally-determined authorities, like teachers, police officers, bosses, and judges. Beyond these, they even experience themselves as authorities over their own desires and actions, as, in Freudian terms, the Superego, or in Lakoffian terms, the Subject-Self split, (Lakoff, 1996) develops. There are different aspects of the wielding of authority, most importantly, punishment, which Minsky (1984) claims is the most vital to socialization, and nurturance. We will exemplify with the case of punishment.

The perceptual (or primary source domain) correlates of subjugation to punishment in Western society are verbal (scolding) or physical punishment and associated pain, and sequestering, while the corresponding subjective experiences include shame, frustration, and powerlessness. The linguistic expression of these subjective experiences, as the examples in (1) show, come from the source domains of physical pain and inability to move.

- (1) a. The child was deeply hurt by the scathing tongue-lashing she received from her mother.
- b. I want to ditch, but my hands are tied since mom won't let me sign my own absent slips.

The mappings of the primary metaphors will look like the following:

punishment = pain

punisher = pain inflictor

frustration = physical restraint

frustrator = physical restrainer

However, when these primary mappings, PUNISHMENT IS PAIN and FRUSTRATION IS INABILITY TO MOVE, appear in the domain of social action and in relation to society, we cannot simply complete the mappings, but instead must create a complete target domain onto which to map the source domain concepts, since there is not actually an authority figure present. In both of the above primary mappings, the presence of an inflictor is vital. When contemplating the source of feelings like frustration and punishment which originate neither from an individual, authority figure or not, nor from oneself, one must make use of the sole tool available for understanding punishment: metaphor. But through this mapping, a new target domain entity must be constructed: society. This process, metaphorical analogy, is one of the origins of the reification and andropomorphization of society.

References

- Bergen, Benjamin K. 1996. Breakdown of "Society": A conceptual metaphor approach to social theory and the concept of society. Unpublished B.A. Thesis. UC Berkeley.
- Grady, Joseph. 1997. Foundations of Meaning: Primary Metaphors and Primary Scenes. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. UC Berkeley.
- Grady, Joseph. To appear. Theories are buildings Revisited. *Cognitive Linguistics*.
- Lakoff, George. 1996. Sorry, I'm Not Myself Today: The Metaphor System for Conceptualizing the Self In Gilles Fauconnier and Eve Sweetser (Eds.), *Spaces, World and Grammars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.(p. 91-123)
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. To appear. *Philosophy in the Flesh*.
- Minsky, Marvin. 1984. "Jokes and their Relation to the Cognitive Unconscious." In *Cognitive constraints on communication : representations and processes*, Lucia Vaina and Jaakko Hintikka (Eds.). Dordrecht; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co.