Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Emotion, and Narrative

written by Douglas Cairns | 1. November 2022

I was always interested in psychology and read quite a lot of what was then more or less contemporary social psychology for my 1987 doctoral thesis and 1993 monograph on the ancient Greek concept of *aidôs* (shame/respect). But it was a growing realization that I had to think harder about metaphor that got me into approaches drawn from the cognitive sciences.

A lightbulb moment was when I came to see that the approach I favoured with regard to the ancient Greek concept of *hybris* (arrogantly and offensively pushing your own claims to respect and neglecting those of other people) was supported by the way *hybris* is conceptualized in metaphor – as something that builds up inside a particular kind of container (i.e. a plant or an animal) until it can't be contained any more. and bursts out (*exhybrizein*), as a plant bursts into bloom (*exanthein*). The overfeeding that leads vines and almond trees to 'break out in *hybris*' in Aristotle (*On the Generation of Animals* 725b35–6) and Theophrastus (*Causes of Plants* 2.16.8) has its analogue in the misplaced attitudes to luck, risk, and prosperity that lead Xerxes and the Persians to ruin in Aeschylus' *Persians* (lines 821–2):

For *hybris* bursts out in bloom (*exanthein*) and bears as its fruit a crop of calamity, from which it reaps an abundant harvest of tears.

This recurrent metaphorical representation shows that ancient Greeks tended not to think of *hybris* as just a way of behaving (in word or deed), but also as an expression of a certain type of personality that develops in a particular kind of situation.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that there was a whole branch of scholarship founded on the insight that this is precisely what metaphors do, emphasized especially in Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. Ancient Greek theory already recognized that metaphor is a figure of thought and not just a figure of speech. But the cognitive approach – what has come to be called Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) – insists that this mechanism of thought is both fundamental and ubiquitous in the ways we structure our

concepts of ourselves and the world we live in. As Lakoff and Turner put it in *More than Cool Reason* (p. xi):

Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it. It is omnipresent: metaphor suffuses our thoughts, no matter what we are thinking about. It is accessible to everyone: as children, we automatically, as a matter of course, acquire a mastery of everyday metaphor. It is conventional: metaphor is an integral part of our ordinary everyday thought and language. And it is irreplaceable: metaphor allows us to understand our selves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can.

Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought – all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason.

This approach is, of course, not universally accepted. Those of us who apply CMT still encounter the objections that certain past cultures 'had no concept' of metaphor (and so it is supposedly not appropriate for us to use that concept in interpreting those cultures' texts). Or that, since people in a given culture 'really believed' in (for example) the agency of divine beings or of internal 'psychic organs', these conceptions cannot be a matter of 'mere' metaphor. But if I believe that Zeus is the father of gods and men, and if my *thymos* ('spirit', originally perhaps the breath in the lungs) is an internal agent that can urge me to act or offer me an option for action that I then reject, then it is clear that I am drawing on phenomena that are empirically accessible in one domain (the social institution of the family or everyday forms of social interaction between persons) and applying them to less immediate domains to which I have no empirical access (the hypothetical worlds of the gods or of intrapersonal motivation).

This mapping from the familiar and concrete to the unfamiliar and abstract is metaphor. Whether we know we're using it or not, we can't do without it, and it structures all kinds of concepts in which we 'really believe', from 'grasping the truth' and 'making progress in our studies' to 'being overcome by emotion' or 'demolishing our opponents' arguments'.

Much of the most recent debate about conceptual metaphor centres on the extent to which the mapping processes that it involves make use, in the deployment of more abstract concepts, of parts of the brain that deal with primary (e.g. sensorimotor) forms of experience. These are not issues on which classical philologists can make much of a contribution. But we don't need to, since we don't need to know precisely which mechanisms underpin a phenomenon to recognize that the phenomenon is real and powerful in explanatory terms.

And I don't think that it can really be denied that CMT is powerful in those terms. A growing number of us in Classics now argue that CMT is central to understanding ancient (especially Homeric) concepts of mind, and I in particular have argued that it is central to understanding ancient concepts of emotion.

A criticism of CMT that I regularly encounter is that its universalizing tendencies efface the cultural specificity of the phenomena it purports to explain. But this is not, I think, a criticism that stands up to scrutiny.

A case in point would be the ancient Greek use of various kinds of garment metaphor for a wide range of emotions, but especially shame and grief. As a way of saying that Agamemnon has no shame, for example, the Homeric Achilles says he is 'clothed in shamelessness' (*Iliad* 1.149, 9.372); and the onset of grief in Homer and other Greek poetry is regularly described as an experience of being 'veiled' by a metaphorical cloud of emotion. At one end of the scale, these do illustrate the use of a universal mechanism for the construction of abstract concepts. Since these metaphors also structure the non-verbal expression of many of the emotions in question (for ancient Greeks covered their heads in shame and in grief and mourning), they also illustrate the universal truth that metaphor is a figure of thought and not just of language. But though we do find similar metaphors in connection with similar emotions in some other cultures (the figuration of female shame as a concealing garment, for example, is quite common), it is also the case that Greek uses garment metaphors for emotions (such as grief) that are not regularly figured in that way in other languages.

Not only that, but specific details in the way that these metaphors are used also can be enormously informative about many particularities of Greek life

and thought. The use of garment metaphors allows us to draw links between emotions (such as grief) and non-emotional experiences (such as darkness, night, and the process of dying) that are figured in the same way. Night and darkness, for example, can be said to cover the earth, like a blanker, but both night and darkness, as types of garment, are also associated with the process of death: 'darkness (*skotos*) covered his eyes' is a regular Homeric way of saying 'he died', while, in the *Odyssey,* a prophet foresees the death of the Suitors in a way that brings together garment metaphors for both death and mourning (*Odyssey* 20.351–7):

'Ah, wretched men, what evil is this that you suffer? Clothed in night are your heads and your faces and your knees beneath you; kindled is the sound of wailing, bathed in tears are your cheeks, and sprinkled with blood are the walls and the fair rafters. Full of phantoms is the porch, full too the courtyard, of phantoms that hasten down to Erebus beneath the darkness. The sun has perished out of heaven and an evil mist has run over all.'

At yet another level, metaphors illustrate common ground between emotions such as anger, shame, and grief, on the one hand, and the role of veiling in social institutions such as marriages, funerals (for both mourner and deceased), and mystic initiation, on the other. The veiling performed by the angry, the ashamed, and the grieving visually enacts the same separation from others as is depicted also in the veiling of the bride, the covering of the corpse during the funeral, the veiling of the ritual mourner, and the veiled head of the initiate. It is also striking that garment metaphors for emotion exist only in those cases in which actual garments are used in the performance and expression of the emotion in question. In that way, the everyday expression of the emotion in concrete, physical terms draws on the emotion's metaphorical construction; and the metaphorical construction is also rooted in the pragmatics and phenomenology of emotional expression.

Quite how fine-grained such data can be in the specificity of the information they provide is demonstrated by the way that verbal aspect can be used to capture fine degrees of nuance in the conceptualization of different emotions by the same general type of metaphor. Typically, the experience of grief (figured as a garment or as a cloud that envelops you like a garment) is spoken of using the aorist aspect (used of a simple past action) whereas *aidôs* (shame, respect) attracts the perfect (marking a present state of affairs that results

from a past action). The onset of grief is figured as a single, sudden event, whereas *aidôs* is worn as a long-lasting disposition. The particular phenomenology of each of the two affective states conditions the particularities of its conceptualization in metaphor.

The similarity that these metaphors construct between emotional states and events, on the one hand, and rites of passage such as burial, mourning, marriage, and mystic initiation, on the other, is informative in another way. The use of the garment in these cases enacts a liminal stage in a three-part event structure that is typical of rites of passage. Thinking of life events as a kind of journey is a very common use of metaphor. But in these cases, it reminds us that we also think of emotions as events, and we enact and experience them in terms of flexibly configurable narratives called scripts.

This means that emotions have a kind of narrative structure of their own, a structure that is especially apparent when they are embedded in the larger, multiply-nested narratives of the literary artefacts we study, such as drama and epic poetry (see Goldie 1999; 2012). In recent work, I've become increasingly interested in the symbiosis between the narratives by which we construct our own and interpret others' emotional experience and the poetic, dramatic, and literary narratives in which such narrative understandings are encapsulated, codified, preserved, and transmitted.

The idea that emotion concepts are fundamentally script- or narrative-like in form is not at all new; but it takes on added importance if we consider that the narrative understanding that we have of our own and others' emotions may reflect a more fundamentally narratival aspect of self- and other-understanding more generally. Narrative is coming into its own, both as a characteristic mode of self-understanding (e.g. Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan 2003) and as mode of other-understanding (e.g. Gallagher 2020) that challenges more traditional approaches to social cognition that explain other-understanding in terms of theoretical inference or with reference to processes by which we simulate others' experiences (explicitly, at a sub-personal level, or both).

All this I find very exciting, because it brings my interest in ancient Greek emotion into close relation with my interest in ancient Greek drama and epic poetry. If the conceptualization of emotion is typically narrative-like in form, then in reading the ancient narratives in which emotion narratives are

embedded we have access to primary data on ancient emotions, much as we understand our own and others' emotions today in narrative terms. Others' emotions are not private, internal, wholly subjective experiences to which we have, at best, only imperfect access. They're stories that we tell about why we and others behave as we do. And if those stories can lie or mislead, a lying tale is still a tale, and we can try to understand it in the wider contexts, the wider narrative structures in which it is embedded. The thing about a story is that it almost always entails context: the stories, scripts, or narratives that we use to talk about emotion are not just about what goes on in the head or in the heart, but also about the social contexts, relationships, and larger structures of events in which subjective experience is located. With such materials, especially as provided by ancient narratives, [we can do emotion history]!

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