Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking
A Dynamic View

CORNELIA MÜLLER
METAPHORS DEAD AND ALIVE,
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This book is a product of many years of public and private reflections concerning metaphors, mental imagery, iconicity in language, and how they relate and bear upon processes and products of thought. This issue has fascinated me for a long time because it challenges one of the taken-for-granted tenets of linguistics, namely, that imagery and iconicity are not relevant features of language. Arbitrariness of signs is what makes language the system it is. Iconicity, imagery, and metaphors are traditionally seen as random facets of language. I believe the book is a further proof that imagery of supposedly dead metaphors is still alive. In an earlier version this book was submitted and accepted as a Habilitation Thesis to the Freie Universität, Berlin, in July 2004.

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I dedicate this book to Christian, who throughout the years of thinking about dead metaphors kept reminding me of their aliveness.
The following transcription conventions have been used:

**Gesture Description**

- **rh**: right hand
- **lh**: left hand
- **bh**: both hands
- **PU**: palm oriented upward
- **PD**: palm oriented downward
- **PA**: palm oriented away from the body
- **OH**: open hand
- **[text]**: square brackets in the verbal line indicate beginning and end of the gesture phrase
- **text**: bold faces indicate the gesture stroke
- **∥**: vertical lines indicate change of configuration within one gesture phrase

**Speech transcription**

- **tExt**: capitals indicate emphasis
- **=**: cutting off an utterance and beginning of an interruption
- **/**: rising intonation
- **\**: falling intonation
- **.h**: audible inhalation
- **.|**: micropause
- **[.]**: longer pause (each dash for about 0.25 second pause)
- **a::**: lengthening of vowels
- **(?4sec!)**: unintelligible speech with length
- **(. . .)**: ellipsis in the transcript
A basic and commonly held assumption of theories of metaphor is that verbal metaphors may be either dead or alive. The following quote from one of the most influential twentieth-century scholars of metaphor—Max Black—may serve as a representative illustration: “For the only entrenched classification is grounded in the trite opposition (itself expressed metaphorically) between ‘dead’ and ‘live’ metaphors” (Black 1993, 25).

Black’s polemic statement demonstrates how commonplace the idea of attributing the properties of dead or alive to metaphors is among scholars of metaphor. This well-established classification of metaphors is explicitly challenged by George Lakoff and Mark Turner’s claim that a huge amount of so-called dead metaphors (that is, conventional metaphoric expressions) are in fact alive: “Determining whether a given metaphor is dead or just unconsciously conventional is not always an easy matter. . . . However, there are plenty of clear cases of basic conventional metaphors that are alive—hundreds of them—certainly enough to show that what is conventional and fixed need not be dead” (Lakoff and Turner 1989, 130).

Clearly, this claim—first formulated by Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their 1980 monograph Metaphors We Live By—implies that the category of “live” metaphors is much larger than generally assumed and encompasses the conventional metaphoric expressions of ordinary language. This conception stands in sharp contrast to traditional views holding that only novel and poetic metaphors are to be considered as vital or alive.

I wish to challenge this commonly shared but empirically unverified view by providing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence in support of the Lakoffian position, namely, that conventional verbal metaphors are for the most part dead and alive. Moreover, I shall suggest that this is not only because they supposedly draw upon active conceptual metaphors, as Lakoff, Johnson,
and Turner argue, but also because their metaphoricity is empirically documentable. Verbal, pictorial, and gestural contexts of conventional verbal metaphors clearly show that the source domains of conventionalized verbal metaphors may be active for a given speaker/writer at a given moment in time and may be not active for another speaker/writer at another moment in time. This observation has important theoretical consequences for a theory of metaphor since it suggests that metaphoricity is not merely a property of a linguistic item but the cognitive achievement of a speaker/writer or listener/reader.

Furthermore, adopting a cognitive and a usage-based approach to the problem of dead versus live metaphors reveals that metaphoricity is by nature gradable; it may be more active in one context and less active in another one, which turns the question of a fixed property—dead versus alive—into a question of the activation of metaphoricity. Note that this implies a shift toward the production side of metaphors, which contrasts with the more common focus of metaphor theory and research on the reception side.

In sum, I hold that departing from a cognitive approach to metaphors in language use reveals that metaphors are a cognitive activity of speakers/writers and that as such they are inherently dynamic. This dynamic view has fundamental consequences for a theory of metaphor and—as I shall suggest—is an unfilled gap in contemporary and traditional Western reflections on metaphor.

0.1 Dead and Live Metaphors: Two Examples

Take the following lines as if they were the initial sentences of a newspaper article reporting on the relationship between the leader of the German Christian Democratic Party, Angela Merkel, and her general secretary, Laurenz Meyer.

Example 1: “In den Schatten stellen” (to put in the shade)

In den Schatten stellen will Laurenz Meyer CDU-Chefin Angela Merkel sicher nicht, aber ein eigenes Profil gewinnen schon.

[Laurenz Meyer certainly does not want to put the leader of the CDU, Angela Merkel, in the shade, but he does want to create a distinctive image of himself.] (Der Tagesspiegel, October 25, 2000).

Typically, the idiomatic expression “in den Schatten stellen” (to put in the shade) would be considered a dead metaphor. Traditional theories of
metaphor would assume that its imagistic or source dimension has faded and, therefore, that it would not be consciously perceived by an average reader. Instead, only its figurative meaning should be activated. The standard *Dictionary of German Idiomatic Expressions* paraphrases this figurative meaning as follows: “Shade or shadow: to put something, someone in the shade [Schatten: etwas, jemanden in den Schatten stellen]: make something . . . appear small, surpass a person in his/her achievements, diminish him/her in the eyes of others” (Röhrich 1994, 1304). Hence, “in den Schatten stellen” (to put in the shade) is a dead metaphor because its concrete, sensory dimension is no longer consciously perceived. In an instructive overview of metaphor theories, Gerhard Kurz summarizes this commonplace understanding of vital metaphors: “Nur eine Metapher, die als solche bewußt ist, ist eine ‘lebendige’ Metapher.” [Only a metaphor which is conscious as such is a “vital” metaphor] (Kurz 1976, 60).

Of course, Paul Ricoeur’s (1986) famous work entitled “La métaphore vivante” is based on the very same line of argument. For him, a metaphor is the creation of a novel sense in the context of a given sentence. Metaphors are per se not accountable on the level of the lexicon; there is no purely lexical criterion to account for the vitality of metaphor. This is, Ricoeur holds, because metaphors are not phenomena of lexemes but of sentences or, more precisely, of what he calls “impertinente Prädikation” [impertinent predication]. Ricoeur 1986, vi].

To generate a *new* metaphor, at least a sentence is necessary. To put it more precisely, the metaphorical process is to be sought in the main process whose framework is the sentence, namely, the predication. Now, this thesis holds that the semantic extension that takes place within the word is based on a peculiar, unusual use of a predication. The metaphor is an “impertinent predication,” that is, one which does not comply with the usual criteria of appropriateness or pertinence that are applicable to predicates.

A metaphor is a function of language use; it emerges in the creation of a novel sentence in which two distant semantic fields clash and provoke a novel metaphoric sense: a vital metaphor. Therefore, a vocabulary must be considered to be full of dead metaphors—to be a cemetery of dead metaphors.

It is certain that vocabulary is a cemetery of extinguished, obsolete, “dead” metaphors; however, this fact only confirms the thesis that there is no lexical criterion for determining whether or not a metaphor is alive.
or dead. Only in the generation of a new sentence, in an act of outrageous predication is a new metaphor created like a spark that flashes when two semantic fields that were hitherto distant from each other collide. In this sense, a metaphor only exists in the instant in which reading lends new life to the collision of the semantic fields and generates the impertinent predication.4

Put another way, the fact that “shade” (Schatten) in our example above may literally refer to light and shade is supposed to be no longer actively processed by a given reader. Note that Ricoeur only regards the process of metaphor comprehension. The process of metaphor production, the process of employing metaphors, is disregarded. Note, furthermore, that the dead metaphor theory (to use a term coined by Lakoff and Turner 1989, 128) has hitherto not made significant efforts to prove that these everyday metaphors are in fact used as dead metaphors; it has merely been taken for granted that nonpoetic language is full of formerly vital or live metaphors.

Yet if we take into consideration the context surrounding the sentence quoted above, things look different. It turns out that the sentence is a caption accompanying two pictures, one of which depicts the leader of the German Christian Democratic Party as a shadow, and the other of which shows the general secretary looking in the direction of his superior’s shadow.

The pictures indicate that for the journalist, while working on this article and looking for pictures to accompany it, the formerly dead metaphor was in fact alive. In other words, the pictures depict the source domain of the dead metaphor, and in doing so—and this is my point—they display that its metaphoricity was activated at the moment of composing this ensemble of words and pictures. This specific form of text-picture combination may also be interpreted as a device for activating metaphoricity in the comprehension process of the readers, but this is not what I want to stress initially. Rather, I shall focus on the disregarded side of the metaphorical process: the production side of using seemingly dead metaphors in written and spoken language.

We have just seen that pictures may indicate the activation of dead metaphors by depicting their source domain. Now as such this is not a new observation; activations of metaphoricity are known as revitalizations, or re-motivations of dead metaphors (cf. Stöckl 2004). It is a widespread form of text-picture interaction that has been widely exploited in caricature. See, for instance, the caricature below that depicts someone who is able to jump over his own shadow:

Since the use of the prefix “re-” presupposes that under normal circumstances this metaphor would not be vital or motivated, I will not use it.
Instead, I propose the expression “activation of metaphoricity,” which implies that the product metaphor is always a result of the procedure for establishing metaphoricity. I am, in this regard, in line with Ricoeur’s procedural view.

Although this phenomenon may seem hardly surprising as such and has not escaped the attention of metaphor scholars, I consider it to be a first step toward a refutation of the dichotomy dead versus alive because, and this
is crucial for the argument I develop, characterizing text-picture combinations of the above kind as revitalizations implies that under normal circumstances this metaphor is dead. In other words, explaining the text-picture combination in terms of revitalization or re-motivation presupposes the dichotomous dead versus alive distinction. It is this dichotomous and static view of verbal metaphors that I am challenging and seeking to replace (that is, supersede) with a dynamic view. This captures the fact that seemingly dead metaphors may potentially be activated during language use, and hence, they must be considered as either sleeping (when showing a low or no degree of activation) or waking (when showing a high degree of activation). We will return to this distinction in more detail later in this chapter.

For now, let us note that the dynamic view does not just rename the well-known role of the verbal context of metaphors. On the contrary, speaking of a dynamic view highlights the assertion that a core element of metaphor is the cognitive activity of individual speakers/hearers; context in this view is not a disembodied entity that determines the metaphoricity of a given verbal item. Rather, this view suggests that context is always provided by a given writer or speaker. As such, it indicates whether the metaphoricity of a lexical item was active for her or him at a given moment in time. Moreover, the context is provided for a reader or listener, and this means that what is salient for a speaker is made salient for a listener too. Thus, we may methodologically exploit the context and use it as a window onto the cognitive processes underlying metaphor production.

But is the metaphoricity of verbal metaphors indeed gradable? One could quite convincingly argue that the example presented above could also be described in terms of the revitalization of a dead metaphor. So far, we have only seen that a seemingly dead metaphor may be active enough to stimulate the pictorial representation of its source domain. Further argumentative support is needed to strengthen the gradability claim. Another example of the same expression, “im Schatten stehen,” will provide further support. Consider the verbal expression first:

Example 2: “Aus dem Schatten treten” (to step out of the shadows)

Aus dem Schatten will Likud Chef Ariel Scharon heute ins Rampenlicht treten und neuer israelischer Ministerpräsident werden. Seine Chancen dafür stehen gut.

[Today, the leader of the Likud Party, Ariel Scharon, wants to step out of the shadows and into the limelight, and become the
Fig. 3. “Aus dem Schatten... ins Rampenlicht treten” (to step out of the shadows and into the limelight). Metaphoricity is dynamic and gradable. Der Tagesspiegel, February 6, 2001.

In contrast to example 1 above, in example 2 the activation of the source domain of “to step out of the shadows” (aus dem Schatten treten) stimulates verbal elaboration of a specific kind. Here the writer employs an expression that is semantically opposed to the verbal metaphor; more specifically, this opposition functions on the level of the literal meaning of the verbal metaphor, or on the source-domain level. He or she combines “to step out of the shadows” with “into the limelight” (ins Rampenlicht treten), which indicates that the source domain (light and shade as physical states) of the metaphoric expression must have been cognitively activated when this sentence was being written.

Again, this is not a truly new discovery. Recent research on metaphorical discourse, as well as more traditional stylistic research, has documented the same phenomenon and a fairly broad range of similar contextual cues (Heckhausen 1968; Kurz and Pelster 1976; Kyratzis 2003; Stibbe 1996). If, however, we take the pictorial context of the above lines into consideration as well, it turns out that it also depicts the source domain of the dead metaphor. Why? Because Sharon is depicted in the form of a shadow.
Put another way, the source domain of the metaphoric expression is symbolized twice (verbally and pictorially) in addition to the verbal metaphor. This clustering of contextual cues (verbal and pictorial) that I am suggesting indicates a higher degree of activation of metaphoricity in its producer. This proposal is based on a straightforward iconic argument: the more cues point to the source domain, the more active the source domain is at a given moment in time for the language user. In this sense, contextual cues may serve as indicators that allow different degrees of activation in a metaphor to be distinguished. But for the time being, the crucial point is that they indicate that metaphoricity is not only dynamic (that is, a matter of activation) but also gradable (that is, a matter of degrees of activation). In chapters 3 and 5, more evidence for the claimed dynamics will be offered, and chapter 6 presents more evidence in favor of the gradability claim.

Let me conclude the presentation of the two examples given above with a further methodological remark. How can we systematically and reliably decide whether or not metaphoricity is activated in a given speaker at a given moment in time, and if it is, to what degree? My line of argument is rather simple: it takes what is interpersonally salient to be salient intrapersonally. Thus, if a given speaker foregrounds a metaphor by using contextual cues, such as semantic opposition, that is, verbal or pictorial elaboration of the source domain, then these are empirically observable cues that allow the listener/reader to uncover foregrounded, meaningful elements in a given speaker's/writer's stretch of discourse.

In other words, those aspects of meaning that are perceivably foregrounded are regarded as cognitively active for a given speaker/writer during language production. A metaphor then would show a high degree of activation in a given writer at a given moment in time when it is foregrounded in discourse. Why? Because the seemingly dead metaphor was capable of stimulating elaborations of its source domain—be they verbal or pictorial. This observation is the critical point of departure of the argument unfolded in this book. As I intend to show, it has rather far-reaching consequences for a theory of metaphor.

0.2 Consequences: Sleeping and Waking Metaphors

One seemingly minor consequence of the activation potential inherent in dead metaphors is that it directs our attention to the necessity of inspecting this common set of categories more closely. It is remarkable how little attention has been paid to this fundamental distinction between dead and live, or dead and vital, metaphors. It strikes us as very much taken for granted and
as a merely random aspect of what metaphor scholars should be concerned with. As chapter 6 documents in detail, this holds for both the rhetorical and the philosophical traditions as well as for cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor. Max Black (1993, 25–26) discusses it briefly and only as a preliminary to introducing his notions of emphasis and resonance. George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989, 128–31) devote some attention to it in their critical evaluation of what they call the dead metaphor theory. In both cases, it merely serves as a foil to the presentation of a specific kind of argument and as a framework for identifying the particular forms of metaphors that are considered to be the core of the respective theoretical accounts. Hence, whereas for Lakoff and Turner the dead metaphors are of major interest, for Black the live or vital ones are of utmost concern. As Black states, “I shall be concerned hereafter only with metaphors needing no artificial respiration, recognized by speaker and hearer as authentically ‘vital’ or ‘active’” (Black 1993, 25). This is a quite notable fact, especially because Black recognizes the coarseness of the established bipolar distinction and introduces a more finely grained tripartite classification, which distinguishes extinct, dormant, and active metaphors. Yet his comments on this new classificatory variant are rather discouraging: “But not much is to be expected of this schema or any more finely tuned substitute” (Black 1993, 25). Clearly, such an evaluation deters one from reflecting more closely upon the nature and range of phenomena that this classification struggles with.

With a different goal but with almost similar consequences, Lakoff and Turner discuss the dead versus alive distinction. Their intention is to show that what traditional metaphor theories (including Black’s ground-breaking interaction theory) have considered to be dead metaphors are actually the most vital and active ones because these dead verbal metaphors rest upon highly vital and active conceptual metaphors:

One reason that some theorists have not come to grips with the fact that ordinary everyday language is inescapably metaphoric is that they hold the belief that all metaphors that are conventional are “dead”—they are not metaphors any longer, though they once might have been. This position which fails to distinguish between conventional metaphors, which are part of our live conceptual system, and historical metaphors that have long since died out, constitutes the Dead Metaphor Theory. (Lakoff and Turner 1989, 128–29)

In a provocative stance, Lakoff and Turner turn the traditional argument upside down: what has hitherto been considered dead is now considered to be