

## THE INTERNET IN THE MIND: THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE CATEGORY OF THE INTERNET IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to investigate our understanding of the concept of the Internet. In order to do so, an analysis within the paradigm of Cognitive Linguistics is performed. Firstly, the fundamental assumptions, upon which the Cognitive Linguistics are built, are discussed. Secondly, the theory of conceptual metaphor is brought up as it is one of the most significant theories within the said paradigm. Cognitive linguists claim that our understanding of abstract concepts (such as, for example, the Internet) is metaphorical; the complex concepts are understood in terms of simple ones related closely to our bodily and cultural experiences. Therefore, the metaphor governs our cognitive processes and construes our view of the world. Thirdly and lastly, the conceptual metaphors constituting our understanding of the concept of Internet are investigated.

**Key words:** Cognitive Linguistics, conceptualisation, Internet, conceptual metaphor

### INTRODUCTION

Ever since the beginning of the Internet, its popularity has constantly been growing. Its widespread use has led to major changes in numerous public and private fields. The Internet transformed – among others – the idea of work, communication, relationships, science, or free time. If one would like to chat with friends, he or she can either meet with them in person or Skype them. If one needs to find an article for research, he or she can go to the library, as well as find it online. If one has got some free time on their hands, he or she may go to the cinema or theatre, or they may as well play computer games or watch TV series online.

The Internet surely plays a crucial role in the life of modern society individuals – to the point that it partly construes their view of work, free time, or communication. But how is the concept of the Internet constructed itself? Is there any motivation hiding behind its construction? Perhaps, the Cognitive Linguistics and the analysis with the use of conceptual metaphor could provide – even a tentative – answer to those questions. Hence, in the article, the basic assumptions of the Cognitive Linguistics are shortly reviewed to put the said perspective within a wider scope. Then, the conceptual metaphor – its origins, main ideas and examples – is briefly examined. Finally, the investigation of conceptual metaphors functioning in relation to the concept of Internet takes place. The author also attempts to provide a tentative hypothesis explaining the choice of such conceptual metaphors.

### COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS - BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Perhaps, the proper way to begin the discussion on Cognitive Linguistics is – as Mark Johnson sees it – with the philosophy of Objectivism. According to Johnson, the Objectivism has taken over multiple fields such as philosophy, psychology, or linguistics for that matter (1987, p. xi). In short, it rejects intersubjectivity and variation in favour of a God-like world view, in which there is one truth and one truth only. The objects are made up of invariable properties; by 'invariable', we mean that they depend neither on the context nor on the subject that recognises them. To gain the knowledge of the world is to gain the knowledge of those properties and relations between the said objects. Hence, the human subject appears to be excluded from the cognition. Furthermore, the language itself is viewed as an arbitrary creation that acquires meaning only when it refers to those objects, relations etc (Johnson, 1987, p. x).

However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many arguments against the objectivistic view of world have risen. Firstly, Objectivism provides no explanation and, what is more, leaves no space for phenomena such as semantic changes or shifts (Johnson, 1987, p. xii). Let us consider the semantic change of the word 'idiot'. Nowadays, it is an offensive way of saying that someone is a foolish person. Yet, there are at least two other meanings of the word which are not applicable anymore. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, 'idiot' was a noun used to describe a person that did not have certain professional competence. Furthermore, already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'idiot' was a technical term used in psychology to denote "a person of the lowest order in a former and discarded classification of mental retardation, having a mental age of less than three years old and an intelligence quotient under 25" (<http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/skill>, April, 2016); the term was abandoned as it became too offensive. Secondly, the concepts are not as stable as the Objectivism claims them to be. *Per contra*, it appears that concepts are highly dependable on the social and cultural background of an individual and, thus, they are not universal (Johnson, 1987, pp. xi-xii). Eugene A. Nida provides an interesting example illustrating this issue in the context of translation. The scholar reports that in his translation of the Bible to Guaica, he experienced difficulties already on the level of the very fundamental concepts, such as 'good' and 'bad'. Surely, those two concepts are present in Guaica but their understanding is far from the Western one. For instance, the term 'good' is associated with "killing enemies, chewing dope in moderation, setting fire to one's wife to teach her to obey, and stealing from anyone not belonging to the same band", while the term 'bad' covers "murdering a person of the same band [or] stealing from a member of the extended family" (after Bassnett, 1991, p. 30). Thirdly, in Objectivism the process of categorisation and the construction of the category is based on a given set of properties that need to be present in order to categorise an object as one thing and not as something else. Yet again, it seems that the categorisation and categories operate on a different basis; namely, they engage metaphor, metonymy, or construal (Johnson, 1987, p. xi).

These abovementioned reflections and findings – and many others, for which there is neither time nor place to discuss – have led to the shift of paradigm and

search of new theories. Two names are worth mentioning here – Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky – as these two scholars took a step from the objectivistic point of view and created bases that modern linguistics is built upon. De Saussure no longer views language as a set of logical sentences acquiring meaning only when referring to the real world. On the contrary, de Saussure proposes a dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* and, hence, introduces an individual to the language. In short, *langue* is a set of abstract rules shared by the group of its users, whereas *parole* is an individual realisation of this code. However, as Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens notice, there is no link between the two concepts, *langue* and *parole* (2007, p. 11). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chomsky proposes another distinction providing the said connection, namely *competence* and *performance*. The notion of competence is similar to *langue*, yet Chomsky provides here “the missing link between social code and individual usage [which] is the individual’s knowledge of the code” (Geeraerts, & Cuyckens, 2007, p. 11). Therefore, competence is understood as the set of abstract rules shared by the users of a given languages and their knowledge of those rules. Performance is basically *parole*.

Even though the link between the language and the individual has been provided, it appears that certain crucial elements were still excluded from the theory and practice, i.e. social and cultural background of an individual. Branches of linguistics such as pragmatics or sociolinguistics were already present at that time; however, they did not involve grammar in their analyses (Geeraerts, & Cuyckens, 2007, p. 13). This involvement of both grammar and socio-cultural background is precisely what the Cognitive Linguistics aims at – the ultimate goal is to contextualise language. First and foremost, cognitive linguists view language as a tool that allows an individual to store, transform, and transfer information. It is a structure that stores previous experiences of an individual and arranges new ones. This experience is of utmost importance within the realm of Cognitive Linguistics; the language is not merely a set of abstract rules anymore. On the contrary, it is strongly based on the both bodily and socio-cultural experience<sup>1</sup> of the language user. The language reflects not only the said experience but also the speaker’s needs and intentions. Therefore, the grammatical and lexical choices are not random but highly motivated (Langacker, 2008, p. 43). The meaning is not given once and for all but it is strictly related to the process of conceptualisation, which is understood as a way of assigning meaning (Geeraerts, & Cuyckens, 2007, pp. 5-7, 14). The language is viewed in the categories of probability, instead of certainty (Lee, 2002, p. 1). Hence, the binary logic and the law of the excluded middle are rejected. The binary logic is rejected as it assumes that there are only two values: truth and falsehood, whereas the law of the excluded middle proves that for any statement there are two possible options: either this statement is true or its negation must be (Tabakowska, 2001a, p. 29).

To sum up, the Cognitive Linguistics views one’s linguistic choices as purposeful (Lee, 2002, p. 2). The language that one uses is deeply rooted in his or her

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1 Some scholars call the bodily experience – the primary one, and the socio-cultural experience – the secondary one, as the bodily experience is said to occur first and the socio-cultural experience is thought to only reinforce the already existing structures (e.g. Krzeszowski, 1997).

experience and depends on his or her cognitive abilities. Consequently, Cognitive Linguistics is interested in issues such as categorisation, prototypicality, and metaphor and investigates such phenomena as the experiential bases underlying the everyday language use, rules upon which the language structure is built, and the relation between the grammar and meaning (Geeraerts, & Cuyckens, 2007, p. 4).

### CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

In 1980, Mark Johnson and George Lakoff published their manifesto entitled *Metaphors We Live By*. The scholars reject therein the traditional approach to the metaphor, which views metaphors as characteristic of literary language and deviant or at least uncommon. Firstly, Johnson and Lakoff question the division between the literary and ordinary language claiming there is no such division at all. Secondly, they consider the metaphor to be more common rather than unusual. The authors claim that they have discovered "that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). More strictly speaking, the metaphor is closely related to the process of mapping conceptual domains. Human's cognitive processes display metaphorical nature as an individual understands certain complex concepts in terms of other, more simple and less abstract ones. Furthermore, the semantic structure is so strong that one does not only think metaphorically but also acts and experiences in such a way. In order to avoid confusion, Lakoff and Johnson use the term *conceptual metaphor* (Tabakowska, 2001b, p. 64). The "classic metaphor" is thought to be non-standard extension of the conceptual metaphor (Lakoff, 2007, pp. 267-268).

Let us consider an example provided by Lakoff and Johnson:

- You're wasting my time.
- This gadget will save you hours.
- How do you spend your time these days?
- That flat tyre cost me an hour.
- I've invested a lot of time in her.
- You're running out of time.
- Thank you for your time (after: Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, pp. 7-8).

All those expressions are readable, natural and used on daily basis. However, closer analysis reveals that none of the sentences is understood literally. For example, when a boss tells his employee that he is wasting his time, he does not mean that the employee took the boss's time and threw it into the garbage bin. He means that he could spend his time (which is another conceptual metaphor) doing something else; and here he views time as something valuable and material. He can spend it on something the same way he spends money. Similarly, in the sentence (2), one cannot literally save the time, put it into his or her piggy bank and use it up later; yet, the time is viewed as something that can be saved, such as money. Finally, when one claims that "The flat tyre cost me an hour", he or she

did not cash his time and pay with it; though he probably had to do it with money.

As Lakoff and Johnson claim, those sentences are perfectly readable because of the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY<sup>2</sup>; some parts of the concept of time are understood in terms of some parts of the concept of money and, hence, the metaphorical structure of the concept of time is created (1980, p. 7). This phenomenon is thought to be rooted in our culture, which views time as something valuable and limited, and connects it with the concept of money. For instance, we pay for the hotel, swimming pool, gym etc. on the basis of the time we have spent there; we receive the salary depending on the hours we have worked; and we pay nannies and tutors depending on the amount of time they have spent with our children. These experiences allow us to create the metaphor TIME IS MONEY. The structure and our understanding of time is metaphorical because "(...) we are using our everyday experiences with money, limited resources, and valuable commodities to conceptualise time" (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, pp. 8-9).

It should be highlighted once more that the mapping between any two conceptual domains is only partial. For instance, even though we can *spend*, *buy*, or *invest* time, we do not talk about *selling* time. Yet, the expression "I will sell you some of my time" would be readable for the receiver as it would be an extension of the discussed conceptual metaphor. Furthermore, it appears that only abstract concepts present metaphorical structure. Among possible conceptual metaphors, there are TIME IS MONEY, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, ARGUMENT IS WAR or THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS but there is no conceptual metaphor, for which BUILDING, WAR or MONEY would be a target domain (Lakoff, 2007, p. 268). Finally, the questions that arise are how the conceptual metaphors are created and how universal they are since it is thought that they are based on individual's experiences. In order to answer these questions, let us examine another two conceptual metaphors, namely MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN. If there are more and more students each year at the university, one could say: "The number of students is increasing". If the situation is the opposite, one could say: "The number of students is decreasing". The expressions are based on the conceptual metaphors MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN respectively. Those two metaphors have their roots in our everyday experiences related to quantity. If we put one book on top of another, the stack is getting higher and not lower. If we pour some water into the glass, the level of water is increasing and not decreasing (Lakoff, 2007, p. 305). These physical experiences are reinforced by culture. In the case of the metaphor MORE IS UP, it may be the construction of the thermometer or mathematical graph. Therefore, it seems plausible to claim that conceptual metaphors determine not only the way one understands the world but also the construction of the world itself. However, even though everyone seems to experience the quantity in a similar way, the metaphor MORE IS UP is not present in all languages (Lakoff, 2007, pp. 305-306). Generally, it appears that conceptual metaphors are present in all investigated languages and their construction is always the same. The source domain (e.g. BUILDINGS, UP, MONEY) is constructed by the simpler concept and related to our experience, whereas the target domain (THEORY, MORE, TIME) is constructed

2 The notation of the conceptual metaphors follows the convention proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

by more complex and abstract concept. *Ergo*, there is a conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY but there is no MONEY IS TIME metaphor. Joseph E. Grady notices that the reverse conceptual metaphors are not even extensions of the already existing metaphors – they seem to be absolutely unreadable (2007, p. 191). Therefore, one will not encounter a metaphor such as MORE IS DOWN. Yet, this does not mean that metaphors do not vary at all across different cultures – because they do. Tim Rohrer notices that one language can identify centre with the heart, whereas the other with the head (2007, p. 33).

Taking all of the above into account, it seems that the existence of a given metaphor in the language is not certain; our experiences make it only more or less plausible. However, the metaphors which stand in opposition to our experiences do not exist (Lakoff, 2007, p. 306). Finally, it is yet not determined how conceptual metaphors are created. Lakoff and Johnson make a tentative claim that when the two domains are repeatedly activated at the same time, a neural connection between them is created (Grady, 2007, p. 194). However, it has not been proven yet.

### THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE INTERNET

Having discussed the theory, let us now move on to the analysis. Below is a table with examples taken from the CoCA [Corpus of Contemporary American English] (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>) and with the proposition of the conceptual metaphor on the right.

Table 1

*Examples of conceptual metaphors involving the concept of Internet*

Examples	Conceptual metaphor
Students <u>use</u> the Internet to gauge projected revenue (e.g., ticket sales and concessions) and expenditures.	INTERNET IS A TOOL
Many people don't know how to <u>do many things</u> and with the Internet, they do.	
Obstacles to developing digital literacy <u>on</u> the Internet in middle-school science instruction.	THE CONTAINER METAPHOR
Students reported <u>searching</u> the Internet to identify self-care strategies, alternative therapies, and information related to nutrition and fitness.	
There was a consensus that patients are more likely to first seek medical information <u>from</u> the Internet before consulting a physician.	
<u>Log out of</u> the Internet finally, will you?	
Tests were available <u>via</u> the Internet and were accessed with a personal login.	THE CONDUIT METAPHOR
So far, the Internet was mainly viewed as an alternative <u>channel</u> for distribution.	
The Internet <u>is the perfect medium</u> for Duginism.	
The digital reproductions of the materials aren't available <u>through</u> the Internet.	

The Open Internet ensures that a <u>pathway</u> for all Internet traffic is provided to flow in the same manner with the same quality.	USING THE INTERNET IS A MOVEMENT (INTERNET IS A JOURNEY)
He cannot just go home, plug it in, and start <u>surfing on</u> the Internet.	
They can find more <u>free guidance on</u> the Internet, especially by using YouTube.	
Without instruction in adopting a critical lens with texts <u>encountered on</u> the Internet, adolescents are prone to replicate oppressive social views and practices.	
Maybe we'll do something else depending on what we find by <u>exploring</u> on the Internet.	

Source: *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, Retrieved from <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

It appears that four metaphors are prevalent: INTERNET IS A TOOL; THE CONTAINER METAPHOR; THE CONDUIT METAPHOR; and USING THE INTERNET IS A MOVEMENT (which may be a detailed variation of the metaphor INTERNET IS A JOURNEY). It should be noted beforehand that these surely are not all of the possible conceptual metaphors and the arguments presented below are only tentative hypotheses as more cognitive research is required in order to prove any of them.

The first metaphor, INTERNET IS A TOOL, seems to be quite straightforward. The Internet is now used by many people to accomplish their goals, e.g. to type and print documents, to pay bills, to make calls, to find information. It allows us to escape from using multiple other tools that used to be necessary such as typewriters, catalogues, telephones. Therefore, it might be viewed as a tool itself.

The second metaphor, namely the CONTAINER METAPHOR is particularly interesting as it belongs to the category of ontological metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson claim that “[o]ur experience of physical objects and substances provides a further basis for understanding – one that goes beyond mere orientation” (1980, p. 25). It allows us to view abstract or non-physical concepts as bounded objects. Then, once they are grasped in such a way, further cognitive processes may take place, e.g. categorisation. The CONTAINER METAPHOR is said to be rooted in our primary experience – i.e. the experience with our own bodies. Humans perceive themselves as containers – the bodies separate an individual from the rest of the world. Objects are also perceived as containers, e.g. classrooms, boxes, cups etc. This inside-outside orientation and boundaries are metaphorically placed upon entities and abstracts that have neither inside-outside orientation nor boundaries. For instance, one can get *out* of the house, get *out* of the meadow (even though the meadow does not present such clear boundaries as the house), as well as get *out* of somebody’s sight. These metaphorical boundaries are transferred upon such abstract concepts as states (to be *in* a coma; to be *in* love), events (to be *at* the party), and activities (to get *into* translating) (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, pp. 29-32). It appears that the Internet is also perceived as a container: something can be *on the Internet* as a book can be *on the table*; one can *search the Internet* as he or she can *search the room*; the information can be taken *from the Internet* as food can be taken *from the fridge*; and finally one can *log out of the Internet* as he or she can *get out of the*

house. A significant question is why we view the Internet as a container. It should be highlighted once more that all the hypotheses are only tentative propositions and they require further investigation. Yet, perhaps this is because we view the Internet as an event; many things are happening on the Internet after all. Nowadays, there are events that take place only virtually, such as game tournaments or even conferences. Perhaps, we view it as a container because we view it as a box that contains books, articles, movies etc. Or, it might be a metaphorical extension since the Internet is coming from a very physical box, such as modem or router.

The CONDUIT METAPHOR also belongs to the group of notably productive conceptual metaphors. The CONDUIT METAPHOR has been proposed by Michael Reddy and further discussed also by Lakoff and Johnson. It is a complex metaphor which, in fact, is constructed by three more specific conceptual metaphors, i.e. IDEAS/MEANINGS ARE OBJECTS; LINGUISTICS EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS; and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, p. 10). These metaphors seem to determine to a great extent the manner, in which we discuss language and communication. To sum up, the result of their application is that "[t]he speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer" (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980, p. 10). We view communication as taking something out of our minds and sending it to our conversational partner(s). For instance, we can try to *get through to somebody* or *send somebody best wishes*. It appears that the Internet is also treated as such a conduit. Therefore, we see the Internet as *a channel* or *a medium* and we can receive something *via* the Internet or *through* the Internet. The application of the CONDUIT METAPHOR to the concept of the Internet may be connected with the primary use of both the metaphor and the Internet, namely communication. And even though it may seem unnecessary, it is worth highlighting that Internet communication is much more than video calls, all kinds of messengers, or e-mails; the Internet is a hypertext and texts serve the purpose of communication (Bartmiński, & Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, 2009).

Finally, the last metaphor (and particularly productive one) is USING INTERNET IS A MOVEMENT. This metaphor may be a detailed variation of the conceptual metaphor INTERNET IS A JOURNEY as MOVEMENT is part of the concept of JOURNEY (e.g. Lakoff, 2007, pp. 270-272). Hence, we talk about *surfing* on the Internet, *exploring* the Internet or even *going* from one webpage to another. Here, the motivation behind such a conceptual metaphor is not so obvious. Perhaps, it is due to the presentation of the Internet as a virtual world. It is a place where everything is possible and total freedom is achievable. Already 20 years ago, America Online released an ad, in which the Internet is presented as a place where you can get "an instant access to the world of sports, finance, computer, and entertainment" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1npzZu83AfU>, ED: April 2016). This element of entertainment is also significant and visible in the construction of the metaphor; after all, both surfing and exploring are exciting activities.

## Conclusions

To sum up, the Internet is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore,

it is understood in terms of simpler concepts based on bodily or cultural experiences of an individual, i.e. conceptualised with the use of conceptual metaphors. The metaphors discussed in this article are INTERNET IS A TOOL, THE CONTAINER METAPHOR, THE CONDUIT METAPHOR, and USING INTERNET IS A MOVEMENT (which may be a part of a more general metaphor INTERNET IS A JOURNEY). It should be borne in mind that this list is by no means finite and that it might be (and probably is) culturally exclusive. The presented analysis is only an attempt at investigating the Internet from a different angle and determining the motivation which may be hiding behind our understanding of the discussed concept.

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