

Metaphor and Human Experience

Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.

University of California, Santa Cruz

The amazing revolution in metaphor studies over the last several decades has led to a tremendous appreciation of the role that metaphor plays in human thought, especially in regard to the structuring of abstract concepts. These studies, seen across many fields (e.g., linguistics, psychology, philosophy, cognitive neuroscience) have suggested to some that metaphors are entrenched patterns in the human conceptual system and play a critical role in diverse linguistic and nonlinguistic actions. Furthermore, metaphors in thought are now widely recognized as being grounded in recurring embodied experience, such that we experience LIFE IS A JOURNEY in a bodily manner given our past and current physical experiences of journeys. Still, metaphor theory typically assumes that inner, conceptual metaphors drive metaphorical language use and action, as if these conceptual metaphors are there waiting to be activated given the right input. My argument is that metaphor must also be studied and understood in terms of its embodied, ecological contexts. Metaphor, in this view, is always a matter of “performance,” or what people do, rather than just the activation of some prior knowledge. I will describe several ways of thinking about metaphor in human experience as a “performance,” as a type of “enaction,” which critically emerges from human self-organizing tendencies. Metaphorical experience unfolds dynamically over time in sensuous bodily ways from a complex interaction of forces that operate along different timescales. Studying these interactions is critical to our understanding of how metaphors are always enactive in exquisitely context-sensitive and adaptive ways.