Metaphors of the Web 2.0

With Special Emphasis on Social Networks and Folksonomies

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that our most important abstract concepts (e.g., emotions) are usually characterized by metaphorical pluralism (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 70), i.e., conceptualization of a single target concept in terms of multiple source concepts. For example, LOVE is simultaneously A UNITY OF TWO COMPLEMENTARY PARTS (e.g., she’s my better half), A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (e.g., she was overflowing with love), A PHYSICAL FORCE (e.g., I was magnetically drawn to her), CLOSURENESS (e.g., they’re very close), POSSESSION (e.g., you’re mine and I’m yours), INSANITY (e.g., I’m crazy about you), WAR (e.g., she conquered him), MAGIC (e.g., she is bewitching), FIRE (e.g., I’m burning with love), etc. (Kövecses 2000: 26-27).

In addition to abstract concepts, metaphorical pluralism often emerges when, as a consequence of a technological innovation, language users need to verbalize (i.e., find expressions that can be used to refer to) a new, highly complex concrete concept such as, for example, the Internet (Gehring 2004: 10). Indeed, given the complexity and the multi-functionality of the global computer network—as is well-known, the Internet is used in a variety of ways, e.g., for communication, commerce, entertainment, etc.—it is not surprising that in addition to being a series of tubes and a rubbish heap, the Internet is also often referred to as agora, electronic frontier, cyberspace, global village, empyrean realm, information superhighway, ocean of information, container, prosthesis for the senses or limbs, city, etc.

Each of these metaphors seems to constitute what Gozzi (1994a: 321) calls master metaphor, i.e., a metaphor “organi[zing] a group of mini-metaphors into a coherent cluster” and thereby attempting to explain the nature of the Internet (or any other complex phenomenon) by highlighting a particular aspect of its use (or a particularly salient feature associated with the phenomenon under consideration). For example, the cyberspace metaphor emphasizes the novelty and the exceptionality of the Internet, e.g., that cyberspace should be immune from regulation through traditional territorial governments because it does not lie within their borders (Blavin and Cohen 2002: 275). In the empyrean realm metaphor, the focus is on a utopian conception of the Internet as the technological implementation of Christian Heaven (Mihalache 2002: 294). The information super-
highway metaphor highlights the transportation of information as the main function of the Internet (Blavin and Cohen 2002: 270), whereas in the container metaphor the Web is represented as a container (e.g., a library or an archive) where information is stored (Markham 2003; cf. Porto Requejo 2007: 197-198). And so on.

Besides master metaphors (many of which can be seen as philosophical conceptions of what the Internet is), there exist a number of metaphorical expressions which, unlike master metaphors, do not apply to the Internet in its entirety but only to a particular Internet-related concept. For example, movement on the Web (e.g., surf/cruise/navigate the Web, browse Web pages, visit a Web site, etc.), structure of cyberspace (e.g., Web site, Web page, Web portal, etc.), particular Internet application/software (e.g., electronic mail, virtual world, virtual store, electronic journal, search engine, firewall, etc.), etc. As Meyer et al. (1997) point out, Internet terminology abounds in metaphorical expressions because they,

by allowing computer users to see a potentially complex concept in terms of a well-known and simple one, aid users in understanding and remembering new concepts. At the same time, metaphorical terms allow users to associate unfamiliar concepts with old, “comfortable” ones, thereby helping to palliate technostress. Software developers have become keenly aware of the “user friendliness” of metaphors, as illustrated by the numerous metaphorical terms found in the vocabulary of user interfaces [...] (pp. 3-4; for a detailed discussion of the role of metaphor in designing software interfaces, see Wozny 1989, Madsen 1994, Smilowitz 1996)


However, none of these studies (including the most recent ones) deal with what during the last three years came to be known as Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005), i.e., a cover term for a variety of services such as social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, hi5, etc.), social bookmarks (SBs) (e.g., Delicious, StumbleUpon, Furl, etc.), video- and photo-sharing services like YouTube and Flickr, blogging sites like LiveJournal and Blogger, wikis like Wikipedia and Wikibooks, etc.—Web sites which, in contrast to traditional 1.0 Web sites (i.e., classical personal Web sites, Web sites of traditional print and electronic media, commercial Web sites, etc.) mainly contain user-generated content. For exam-
ple, profile pages maintained by members of an SNS, URLs of favorite Web pages bookmarked by users of an SB, videos and photos uploaded on services like YouTube and Flickr, a blog entry posted to LiveJournal, an article published on Wikipedia, etc.

The present study is thus an attempt to fill the research gap by analyzing some of the metaphorical expressions associated with two particular Web 2.0 practices: SNSs and folksonomies. The latter term stands for a number of Web 2.0 services of various genres (e.g., social bookmarks, video- and photo-sharing services, blogging sites, etc.) whose distinctive feature is collaborative tagging, i.e., the practice whereby users of these services assign freely chosen keywords to the content which they would like to make findable for other users (Mika 2005: 523).

This study will deal with seven metaphorical expressions—sign up, profile, friend, poke, tag, subscribe, and channel—which can often be found in the context of SNS and folksonomic Web sites and can therefore be considered Web 2.0 metaphors. (Moreover, as we will see, many of these expressions—or, being more exact, things which they denote—can be considered the defining characteristics of social networks and folksonomies.) The primary objective is to analyze both the referential and the conceptual aspects of these terms’ semantics, i.e., what these words stand for and which concepts they signify in the Web 2.0 era.

The study has the following structure. Chapter 2 Basic concepts introduces the main tenets of the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). The reason for this is not only that this theory, to a very large extent, underlies my own understanding of metaphor. Much more important is that unlike other metaphor theories, the approach of Lakoff and Johnson provides a theoretical framework for analyzing systematic metaphors, i.e., metaphors characterized by systematic correspondences between their source and target domains. (And as will be shown in chapters 3-9, each of the metaphors chosen for this study is a metaphor of this type.) In addition to this and some other purely linguistic issues (e.g., differences between extensional and intensional approaches to meaning, factors determining the degree of metaphoricity of a metaphorical expression, the notion of a semi-phaseme, etc.), the chapter will touch on some specific issues relevant for the discussion of Internet metaphors. For example, what is exactly a master metaphor? And do terms like information superhighway, cyberspace, electronic frontier, series of tubes, and other Internet master metaphors have anything in common? Finally, the chapter will elaborate on the term Web 2.0: What are the main differences between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 and are these differences reflected in new metaphors applying to the former but not to the latter? The main part of the study are, however, chapters 3-9. Each of these chapters represents an independent case study containing the semantic analysis of an individual metaphorical expression named above.