
Containment and Division: Evaluating Class-Based Metaphors in Higher Education¹

Copyright © 2018

Prism: Casting New Light on Learning, Theory and Practice

<http://prism-journal.blackburn.ac.uk/>

ISSN 2514-5347

Vol. 2 (1): pp. 144-148

TERRY MCDONOUGH²

University Centre at Blackburn College

terry.mcdonough@blackburn.ac.uk

Language matters. It's as much about the words we use, as it is about what those words reveal about how we think. This is because a language is a culturally transmitted system (Tomasello, 2014). No speaker can ever possess, or even know, the entire code that makes up the system. Instead, speakers have access to the parts that they use the most. Even then, there can be a lot of variation between speakers. There is a good deal of variation between languages, too. Different languages conceptualise the world in different ways. For an English speaker, time moves horizontally from left to right; for a Chinese speaker, time moves vertically from the top down (Boroditsky, 2000). Wherever we look, time is always associated with space. It seems we can't even think about time without also thinking about space.

Thinking of one thing in terms of another is called metaphor. If I say, "I'm looking forward to the end of the year", I am talking about a point in time as though it is a point in space. *Forward* and *end* are spatial reference points. I can do this because I experience time as movement through space. My body is subject to the conditions and circumstances prescribed by the environment in which it exists. This view is known as embodied cognition (Chemero, 2009). I am a brain in a body in an environment. (And so are you.)

¹ An [earlier version of this article](#) appeared as part of the AoC Scholarship Project's Think Piece series.

² Terry McDonough is PRISM's Editor-in-Chief (2017-2020). To avoid a conflict of interest, this article was handled by the deputy editor and a member of the editorial board.

There's an entire branch of linguistics devoted to investigating the relationship between embodied cognition and language. It's known as Cognitive Linguistics (Evans & Green, 2009; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). One of the oldest and most accessible frameworks in Cognitive Linguistics is called Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The idea is that human language is structured by a set of basic embodied concepts (Johnson, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Let me illustrate. A common phrase used in the discourse of education is 'HE-in-FE'. It means Higher Education delivered at a Further Education college. HE-in-FE is a container metaphor. Something is *inside* of something else. Container metaphors are common. We fall *in* and *out* of love, for example. The idea is that we feel like we are these thinking things (minds) that are *inside* these fleshy vessels (bodies), and we know that these fleshy vessels can go *inside* other non-fleshy vessels, like a house or a car (environment). All very practical.

What about being *inside* a country, then? It's a bit more abstract. We draw boundary-lines on diagrams and give these bounded containers a name. *This* container is England. *This* container is France. We can't even move from one bounded container to another without a lot of fuss. We even have big discussions about whether our bounded containers are *in* or *out* of other bounded containers. You caught the EU referendum, I imagine? Quite a lot of talk about containers and which container belongs where. Quite a lot of talk about other people, too, and which container they ought to reside in. *I love this container. This is my container. You are not allowed in my container.*

These imaginary containers can cause a lot of trouble. We love fighting about them. We even have a word for container-based fighting. We call it *war*. It's not too disagreeable, then, to suggest that the way we talk about things represents how we think about things, and that how we think about things affects how we behave, such as getting angry about who resides in which abstract container. We would find it outlandish if we heard politicians telling us they were going to make our container "great again" or ensure that those with different bodies (containers) are sent away to other containers (containers in containers, again). The next time you listen to the daily news you may feel a sense of absurdity creep over you if you switch any reference to a country with the word *container*.

Let's have a think about that phrase *HE-in-FE* again (or *College-based HE* and other terms of distinction). We have established that HE-in-FE is a container metaphor. However, it is inflected by two other abstract concepts: *progress* and *value*. This relates to the concepts of *higher* and *further*.

Broadly speaking, we tend to think of time as an arrow of progress (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For English speakers, time moves horizontally from birth to death (Boroditsky, 2000). Progress move diagonally from the bottom-up: that is, we move incrementally across the arrow of time where each success increases the trajectory of our progress. In contrast to the horizontal progression of time, value has a vertical hierarchy where *high* is good and *low* is bad (Johnson, 1990). We claim to feel *down*, or have our mood *lifted* (up). We might hear idioms such as "going up in the world" or "falling from a great height". These conceptual geometries of value are explicit in our language: we have numerical sequences like primary, secondary, or tertiary; assessment is graded via alpha-numeric scales; we also have vertical sequences like lower, upper, and higher. Such geometries underpin our ways of thinking (see Chilton, 2014).

However, when we bring these two geometries together (the arrow of time/progress, and the scale of value), we find that they don't fit too well. This is because they function on different spatial planes. Progressing further takes us *across* a horizontal plane. Moving higher takes us *up* a vertical plane.

From this perspective, *higher* (education) exists on a different plane to *further* (education). With HE-in-FE, progress and value intersect. This is where the container metaphor becomes important. The *higher-in-further* concept implies an extension of a horizontal plane that is *contained*. HE-in-FE is a progression from the standard limit of FE (6th form, for example) but is not conceptualised as an increase in the value scale where higher-is-better. In accordance with the value scale, HE-in-FE is valued *lower* than HE. Why else would there be a distinct set of terms?

To examine the effect, I must resort to anecdote. I have worked in HE for the past 10 years, at both large universities and at HE institutions that so happen to be located in the same physical space as an FE college. I have delivered the same lectures and seminars in both spaces. My students have studied the same topics, used the same materials, and participated

in the same discussions. The only difference I can recall relates to contracts and expectations, especially when it comes to research. One space sees it as an essential activity; the other sees it as a useful addition. One space aims to strike a balance between research and teaching; the other aims to maximise teaching at the cost of research. It is here that we find a gross inequality. The divisiveness of the language mirrors the divisiveness of the practice (see Fairclough, 2010). It is probably no surprise either to find that HE-in-FE often exists in geographically impoverished areas. Social mobility, or market exploitation? I will let you decide.

Access to HE in spaces accessible to all is a necessary social justice. If we are to devalue those spaces, or make distinctions between them based on access, privilege and location, we only undermine their emancipatory potential. This starts with how we discuss and frame these spaces. In practice, this is managed by the different levels of attention we give to those who seek out higher learning. If the nominal HE-in-FE is framed as an underclass to HE, where students are not expected to receive research-led provision, we only deny the most vulnerable, the most disaffected, and the most deprived, of the opportunities that they rightly deserve. We place them in a different container. You would think that the inverse would be true: that those who have suffered structural inequalities based on a lottery of birth would have access to cutting-edge provision.

What's the solution, then? Can we petition Oxbridge to establish outreach centres in the most deprived locales? Probably not. In essence, though, it's quite simple. Humans learn. We love it. Some of us like a broad sample. Some of us like to model the exact velocity of a worm swirling through a hurricane. It's all wonderful. Let's encompass it all. Let's work towards living in a world where, to quote the late Mr. Lennon, we really are all "clever and classless and free". Let's work towards a world where our language doesn't promote artificial division, where one sector isn't raised above another by virtue of an abstract noun phrase. More importantly, let's work towards a world where we don't salt the earth: where we don't find it acceptable to allow one group of students to benefit from cutting-edge research, while the other makes do with the scraps from that *higher* table. This is a structural inequality so refined that it is barely discussed. Framing and legitimating the practice with abstract terms like HE-in-FE does not remedy the inequality. Instead, the language bars us from addressing the underlying practice.

Addressing inequality begins when we learn to mind our language. It really matters. It matters for gender, it matters for race, it matters for all forms of discrimination. We need to recognise that it matters for class-based discrimination, too. Even a simple phrase can encode and propagate bias and misperception. However, like the conceptual geometries I outline above, it is all a fiction of our own invention. We are all responsible for propagation. Let's be responsible for more positive change instead. Let's start by minding our language. Only then can we tackle the practices that reproduce inequality and division.

References

- Boroditsky, L. (2000). Metaphoric structuring: understanding time through spatial metaphors. *Cognition*, 75(1), 1–28.
- Chemero, A. (2009). *Radical embodied cognitive science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chilton, P. (2014). *Language, space and mind: the conceptual geometry of linguistic meaning*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2009). *Cognitive linguistics: an introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Johnson, M. (1990). *The body in the mind: the bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Tomasello, M. (2014). *A natural history of human thinking*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ungerer, F., & Schmid, H.-J. (1996). *An introduction to cognitive linguistics*. London; New York, NY: Longman.