

# Source ‘scenes’ and source ‘domains’: insights from a corpus-based study of metaphors for communication <sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Aims of paper

The general aim of this paper is to present the implications of a corpus-based study of metaphors for communication in British English for the extrapolation of metaphorical ‘source’ domains from linguistic data. Our specific aims are:

- 1) to provide more evidence for the relevance and centrality of the notion of ‘scene’ (or ‘scenario’) in the analysis of metaphorical patterns, as has been suggested by Grady (1997a) and Musolff (2004);
- 2) to propose a distinction between different types of ‘scenes’, which would go some way towards explaining the relationship between Grady’s primary ‘scenes’ and Musolff’s more elaborate ‘scenarios’;
- 4) to show how ‘scenes’ may stand in a variety of relationship to larger ‘domains’, and to reflect on the appropriateness of generalisations at different levels of conceptual abstraction in metaphor analysis.

## 2. A brief overview of ‘source’ knowledge structures in Cognitive Metaphor Theory

Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) has traditionally explained the existence of conventional patterns of metaphorical expressions (e.g. *I don’t know which way to turn, I am at a cross-roads in my life*) as the linguistic realisation of conceptual metaphors, namely systematic correspondences across domains in conceptual structure (e.g. LIFE IS A JOURNEY). These correspondences are described as ‘mappings’ of structure, elements and relations from a ‘source’ domain (e.g. JOURNEY) to a ‘target’ domain (e.g. LIFE) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The kinds of conceptual structures that may function as source domains include both highly abstract and skeletal ‘image-schemas’ (e.g. PATH or CONTAINER), and rich and complex knowledge structures, including a variety of objects, participants, actions, and relations (e.g. JOURNEY or WAR).

More recently, however, some doubts have been cast on the possibility of properly accounting for observed patterns of metaphorical language use with reference to large and complex source domains such as JOURNEY, WAR, BUILDINGS, and so on. Grady (1997a, 1997b, 1998) reanalysed many of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) examples in terms of ‘primary metaphors’, namely simple, basic mappings that have a strong experiential basis and motivate metaphorical expressions within a variety of different areas of experience (e.g. PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS or ASSISTANCE/HELP IS SUPPORT) (see also Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 49ff.). Primary metaphor, Grady argues, can combine to produce ‘complex metaphors’, which correspond to the traditional conceptual metaphors of cognitive metaphor theory (e.g. the primary metaphors ORGANIZATION IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE and PERSISTING IS REMAINING ERECT combine to form the complex metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS (Grady 1997b)). Within Grady’s approach, the conceptual structures that function as ‘sources’ are ‘primary scenes’, namely ‘simple aspects or dimensions of subjective experience, not confined to any particular rich domain, but cross-cutting these

domains' (Grady 1997a: 100). Primary scenes mainly reflect the basic physical experiences of childhood, such as swallowing an object or being physically close to somebody else.

Kövecses (2002: 107ff.) provides a partly different account of the same kind of problems and phenomena. He points out that some source domains (such as JOURNEY and WAR) have a very wide metaphorical 'scope', i.e. they can function as metaphorical source domains for a wide variety of target domains (e.g. the BUILDINGS domains can be applied to THEORIES, RELATIONSHIPS, ECONOMIC SYSTEMS, and so on). Each source domain has a 'major theme' or 'main meaning focus', which is the conceptual material that is most centrally associated with it within a particular culture. This material is conventionally mapped onto a variety of target domains via the domain's 'central mappings' (e.g. CONSTRUCTION IS BUILDING, ABSTRACT STRUCTURE IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE, and STABILITY/LASTINGNESS IS STRENGTH). These central mappings, Kövecses argues, correspond to what Grady calls primary metaphors (Kövecses 2002: 109-12).

Musolff (2004) adopts Kövecses's notions of main meaning focus and central mappings, but notices that the uses and rhetorical effects of metaphorical expressions in context can only be properly explained via an 'intermediate analytical category between the level of the conceptual domain as a whole and its individual elements' (Musolff 2004: 13). He calls this intermediate category 'scenario', namely 'a minimal but coherent scene that is reminiscent of standard situations, which the users are familiar with as part of their shared cultural knowledge' (Musolff 2004: 38). Scenarios, Musolff argues, 'provide, as it were, the main story-lines or perspectives along which the central mappings are developed and extended' (Musolff 2004: 18). Musolff (2004: 176) claims that scenarios are rooted in primary scenes, but does not pursue the nature of this relationship. What is clear from his examples is that scenarios are much more complex and context-specific knowledge structures than Grady's primary metaphors, such as MARRIED PARTNERS and TRAIN JOURNEY.

The analysis of our data supports the idea that the 'scene' or 'scenario' is a crucial level of conceptual structure in explaining general linguistic patterns, and specific uses and effects in context. We would also like to suggest that there are different types of scenes, including primary scenes and 'non-primary' scenes (such as Musolff's scenarios), and that the latter may in some cases be regarded as domain-specific elaborations of the former. We will also show how different kinds of linguistic patterns require different generalisations beyond the level of the scene.

### **3. The corpus**

Our corpus contains approximately 250,000 words of contemporary written British English (equally divided between fiction, press reports and (auto)biographies). As part of a previous project, the corpus has been tagged for categories of speech, writing and thought presentation (e.g. Direct Speech, Free Indirect Thought), giving us a pre-selected set of references to speaking, writing and thinking. Within the current project, we have examined approximately 5,000 references to spoken communication in the corpus, and classified approximately 20 per cent of these as metaphorical. Our analysis of these metaphorical expressions attempted to identify the relevant source 'concept' in each case, as well as to group 'concepts' under larger conceptual source structures (e.g. domains). Not surprisingly, this turned out to be a challenging task.

#### 4. Types of source scenes in our data

In analysing our data, we found that, in most cases, the kind of knowledge structure that most obviously functions as ‘source’ for individual expressions can be aptly described as a ‘scene’, involving an action, the participant(s) involved in the action, and a goal. Scenes may vary, however, in how basic or generic they are, and also in how they might relate to larger knowledge structures, such as whole conceptual domains.

##### 4.1 Primary scenes in our data

Some of the metaphorical references to communication in our data can be explained in terms of Grady’s primary metaphors. Consider the examples below:

1. Last night Delors attacked Balladur’s idea of a “Europe of circles” in which each member country could progress at its own speed. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 12/12/1994)
2. Yet six months earlier he supported the very same regime in a letter to a fellow MP. (*Today*, 5/12/1994)

Example (1) can be seen as a linguistic realization of the primary metaphor OBJECTING/CRITICISING IS ATTACKING. Here the knowledge structure that functions as source is a primary scene where hostility leads to physical aggression, and the primary metaphor is grounded in ‘the correlation between negative evaluation of objects and the instinct to physically reject them, destroy them, etc.’ (Grady 1997a: 291). Example (2), on the other hand, can be explained in terms of the primary metaphor ASSISTANCE/HELP IS SUPPORT, which, according to Grady, relies on ‘the correlation between physical support and continued functionality’ (Grady 1997a: 283). This particular primary metaphor explains why *support* (both as a noun and as a verb) is used metaphorically in a wide variety of contexts to express the notion of help and assistance (e.g. *financial support*, *moral support*, *technical support*, etc.).

As these examples show, primary metaphors account for metaphorical patterns across contexts or domains, and can explain the metaphorical uses of fairly general expressions such as *attack* and *support*. Many of the expressions in our data, however, could not easily be accounted for in the same way.

##### 4.2 Non-primary scenes as elaborations of primary scenes

Our data contains many examples of expressions which appear to be related to examples such as (1) and (2), but which evoke much more complex, domain-specific scenes. Consider the example below:

3. amid renewed backbench sniping at the Blair style of leadership (*The Guardian*, 13/5/1996)

The metaphorical use of *sniping* in reference to criticism can also be traced back to the primary metaphor OBJECTING/ CRITICISING IS ATTACKING. However, this only explains why *sniping* metaphorically expresses the notion of criticism, but does not explain why the use of this expression in this context suggests repeated and anonymous criticisms (in fact, this also applies to many of Grady’s own exemplifications of primary metaphors). The meaning of this expression can only be explained with reference to a non-primary SNIPING scene,

which is part of our knowledge of modern warfare. We suggest that the non-primary SNIPING scene has its basis in the primary ATTACK scene, but is derived from it via the kind of process that Lakoff and Turner (1989: 67-9) call ‘elaboration’: in this case, the simple, basic, general scene of physical attack is elaborated into a richer, more specific and more complex scene involving a very specific kind of attack, where someone shoots at other people from a concealed place, typically using a gun. This particular type of attack evolved in the course of history as a result of the development of technology and strategy in warfare.

In other words, while, as Grady has shown, primary metaphors can be combined to form complex metaphors, we propose that it is also possible to derive non-primary metaphors from primary ones via the elaboration of primary scenes within specific areas of experience or domains. At a cultural level, this is the result of the development of complex activities such as journeys and war from more basic activities such as purposeful movement and physical attack. At an individual level, more complex and context-specific knowledge structures develop from simpler, more basic structures as one’s experience of the world becomes more varied and sophisticated. It is important to notice that ‘combination’ and ‘elaboration’ are two of the ways in which, according to Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphorical novelty can be achieved. Novel metaphors, of course, can in their turn become conventional, as in the case of the use of *sniping* in relation to communication. In the case of this expression, it is also the case that the relevant non-primary scene is an example of the kind of knowledge structure that Musolff (2004) calls a ‘scenario’. Indeed, we suggest that many of Musolff’s scenarios are elaborations of primary scenes, although this will probably not apply in all cases.

Our data contains several further metaphorical expressions that work in a similar way to *sniping*. Two examples are given below:

4. Church leaders yesterday blasted a politically-correct bible (*The Sun*, 5/12/1994)
5. British Gas has the worst image of any company after a year of soaring complaints and flak over fat cat pay. (*The Daily Star*, 13/5/1996)

The metaphorical uses of *blast* and *flak* in relation to communication can be explained in terms of non-primary scenes that are elaborations of the primary ATTACK scene. In both cases, the elaboration is the result of the development of particular forms of armed attack that is typical of warfare. And, in both cases, the nature of the weaponry that is part of the non-primary source scene helps to explain the (conventional) metaphorical meanings of the expression: very strong criticism in the case of *blast*, and repeated and potentially abusive criticisms in the case of *flak*.

Interestingly, Roger Schank’s (1982, 1999) model of ‘dynamic memory’ also includes ‘scenes’ as the basic level of conceptual structure. Schank defines scenes as ‘general structures that describe how and where a particular set of actions take place’ (e.g. a WAITING ROOM scene) (Schank 1999: 113). According to Schank, scenes are combined to form larger structures, which he calls ‘Memory Organization Packets’, or MOPs (e.g. a PROFESSIONAL OFFICE VISIT MOP). Different versions of the same scene will be activated depending on the specific context (e.g. a visit to a dentist as opposed to an accountant). It

could be argued that MOPs correspond to the kinds of rich and complex domains that are normally discussed in Cognitive Metaphor Theory.

In our case, scene such as SNIPING, BLASTING and FLAK are part of the larger domain of WAR(FARE), which, in Schank's model, is a MOP which also organises many other scenes (e.g. GROUND ATTACK, AERIAL BOMBARDMENT, and so on). In the case of our examples, an analysis at the level of the underlying primary scene (OBJECTING/ CRITICISING IS ATTACKING) explains the experiential grounding of these metaphorical expressions; an analysis at the level of the relevant non-primary scenes explains the specific meanings of each expression; and an analysis at the level of the domain/MOP captures the fact that antagonistic communication is conventionally talked about via a range of different expressions that evoke scenes which are part of the larger domain/MOP of WAR (including, for example, 'bombarding with questions', 'stepped up his guerrilla warfare against'). This results in the kind of conceptual metaphor that is familiar in cognitive metaphor theory, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR (in fact, Semino (2005) argues that the most relevant source domain is PHYSICAL CONFLICT, of which WAR is a prominent part).

This kind of analysis does not apply in all cases, however. In a number of cases, for example, a particular expression may evoke a particular scene, but there is insufficient linguistic evidence to make a generalisation at the level of the domain that the scene belongs to. Consider the example below:

6. The US envoy, Charles Redman, is separately touring the region to bolster support for the new peace moves (*The Independent*, 5/12/1994)

Here the expression *bolster support* is used metaphorically to refer to the attempt to increase others' favourable opinions about something. The evoked non-primary scene (where an extra pillow is added to prop up someone in bed), can be seen as a very specific elaboration of the primary scene of SUPPORT, which functions as source in the primary metaphor ASSISTANCE/HELP IS SUPPORT (Grady 1997: 283). We have no evidence, however, that any other scenes from the larger domain of BED-MAKING provide expressions that are conventionally used metaphorically in relation to communication. So, here a generalisation at the level of domains would be inappropriate.

#### ***4.3 Other types of scenes: animal behaviour***

A number of metaphorical expressions in our data metaphorically describe human communication in terms of animal behaviour. Two examples are given below:

7. "How much did you sell her, then?" Dennis butted in, thrusting his face forwards till it was only inches from the dealer's. (Val McDermid, *Dead Beat*, 1992, p. 168)
8. an excuse which no more convinced Claudie on that occasion than it did when parroted by me in later years (Peregrine Worsthorne, *Tricks of Memory*, 1993, p. 125)

Animal metaphors often require more complex explanations that we have space for here, since they tend to result from the culture-specific attribution of human valence to animal behaviours, and the subsequent metaphorical mapping of those behaviours back onto

human behaviour (e.g. see Kövecses 2002: 125). However, it seems clear to us that the metaphorical uses of these expressions can be explained in terms of scenes involving specific animal behaviours.

The metaphorical use of *butt in* in the sense of an aggressive conversational interruption or intervention in (7) can be explained in terms of a scene where an animal hits or pushes against something or someone with its head or horns (the literal meaning of the expression is also relevant here, given the description of the character's bodily movements). Strictly speaking, such a scene does not quite fulfil Grady's criteria for primary scenes, but it is clearly more basic than scenes such as SNIPING or BLASTING. It may also be argued that the BUTTING scene is a specific elaboration of a more general COMPELLING FORCE scene, which, according to Grady, is involved in the primary metaphor COMPULSION IS A COMPELLING FORCE (e.g. *My friends pushed me into volunteering*). However, the argument seems less straightforward here than in the case of the examples discussed in the previous section.

As far as example (8) is concerned, *parroted* is used metaphorically to indicate the mechanical repetition of words or ideas that one does not fully believe or understand. This expression can be explained in term of a scene where a stereotypical parrot imitates the sounds of words without necessarily understanding their meaning or communicative function. This kind of scene cannot easily be related to any of the primary scenes described by Grady, but is part of our stereotypical knowledge about a salient behaviour of a particular type of bird.

Regardless of the status of these scenes to do with animal behaviour, we also need to consider the issue of what generalisations, if any, can be made on the basis of examples such as (7) and (8) (and others such as *weasel words*, *ratting on someone*, and so on). There is, we would argue, sufficient evidence to suggest that, at a general level, the domain of COMMUNICATION is partly constructed in terms of the general domain of ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR (cf. the discussion of PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS in Kövecses 2002: 124ff.). However, in this case the larger domain is not a MOP-like structure that acts as an organising frame for a number of scenes (such as WAR or PROFESSIONAL OFFICE VISIT). Rather, the ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR domain represents a superordinate category, whereas the animals prototypically involved in the evoked scenes correspond to basic-level categories (parrot, rat, weasel). This may explain why the metaphorical expressions that may be traced back to the ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR source domain appear to be less closely related to each other than those that can be traced back to the WAR source domain.<sup>2</sup> Much more work still needs to be done on the nature of the generalisations about conceptual structures and mappings that can be made on the basis of linguistic patterns.

#### **4.4 Unrealistic scenes**

One of the common themes of metaphor theory generally is that metaphors rely on common, familiar experiences as vehicles/source domains. Grady (1997a) questions the claim that *target* concepts or domains tend to be distant and unfamiliar, but nevertheless emphasizes that, in primary metaphors, *source* scenes are part of our most basic and often earliest physical experiences. The analysis of our data partly questions these claims, since we have collected a number of expressions which evoke scenes that are not straightforwardly recognisable as part of our experience Consider the examples below:

9. “She really tore his head off and then gave him a long lecture about politeness ...”  
(*The News of the World*, 28/4/1996)
10. After Claudie had reluctantly and shamefacedly put him in the picture about Cardinal’s Wharf, he became really interested. (Peregrine Worsthorne, *Tricks of Memory*, 1993, p. 125)

The metaphorical use of the expression *tear someone’s head off* in (9) can be traced back to the primary metaphor OBJECTING/CRITICISING IS ATTACKING. However, the specific meaning and connotations of the expression (to criticise someone very strongly and aggressively), can only be explained with reference to a particular elaboration of the scene which involves a particularly extreme kind of attack. Strictly speaking, however, a scene where someone tears somebody else’s off is rather unrealistic, both because it is physically implausible and because it is morally unacceptable. There are of course plenty of familiar scenes where the head or a body part of a human or animal is cut off, but we would argue that the hyperbolic effects of expressions such as these partly depends on the fact that the literal scene they evoke is rather extreme and unrealistic.

Example (10) is different. No hyperbole is involved here, but it is nevertheless the case that the literal scene evoked by the expression *put someone in the picture* is implausible and unrealistic. In this case, the metaphorical meaning of informing someone about something could be explained as a combination of primary metaphors such as KNOWING/UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING and COMPULSION IS A COMPELLING FORCE (Grady 1997: 287, 296). However, it is also the case that we are able to construct imaginary, unrealistic situations, and use them for reasoning purposes: if someone was put in a picture, they would be able to see it very well; given the conventional conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, a scene where someone is put in a picture can function as source for the communicative process where someone is informed about something.

Given that imagining unrealistic, impossible and counterfactual situations is a central part of the cognitive activities of human beings (in fiction and elsewhere), it is not surprising that such situations may also function as metaphorical source scenes. In our examples, however, unrealistic source scenes can always be connected in some way to familiar scenarios and/or conceptual metaphors. This may not necessarily apply in all cases, however, especially with novel metaphorical expressions.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the preliminary analysis of our corpus data so far supports the idea that the ‘scene’ is a crucial level of conceptual structure for metaphor analysis, where it is possible to explain the experiential grounding of expressions and their specific meanings and uses. However, we have shown that different types of scenes need to be postulated in order to explain different kinds of metaphorical expressions. These include: primary scenes as defined by Grady; non-primary scenes which may be derived from primary scenes via domain-specific elaboration (and which often correspond to Musolff’s scenarios); other types of scenes that are less easy to classify in these terms, including scenes that do not straightforwardly correspond to familiar experiences. We have also shown how the nature of the available linguistic evidence affects the kind of generalisations that may (or may not)

be made at the level of larger conceptual domains. Clearly, these can only be preliminary observations: further work is needed on these central issues in metaphor theory and analysis.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the problems posed by animal metaphors are even more complex than we have the space to show here. It would be possible, for example, to subsume the scenes they evoke under different domains, depending on whether they relate primarily to sound, body parts, physical aggression, and so on (see Goosens *et al.* 1995).