

# Convention and Metaphor

Compiled by Robin Turner from cogling@ucsd.edu

29th November 2002

## Abstract

The following posts occurred on the cogling mailing list in November 2002. The discussion arose out of previous thread “Limitations of Schema Theory”. In this thread the nature and function of convention is discussed, with particular relation to the work of Lewis, Grice and Davidson.

As far as I am aware, this thread is complete between the dates indicated. Some minor typographical changes have been made for the sake of consistency (e.g. replacing single quotes with double quotes) or aesthetics (e.g. *\_conventional\_* becomes *conventional*). A few salutations and quotations of prior posts have been omitted. Where previous posts are quoted, they appear in italicised blockquotes. Subject headings have also been omitted; with the obvious exception of the first post, they are all “Re: Convention and Metaphor”.

**Bill Croft (w.croft@MAN.AC.UK)**

**Tue, 19 Nov 2002**

Convention is perhaps the most neglected fundamental property of language. The following definition of convention is based on David Lewis (*Convention*, 1969) and Herb Clark (*Using Language*, 1996), as combined in my *Explaining Language Change* (p. 98). [The notion of coordination is that in joint—cooperative—human action such as communication, the interactors must coordinate their individual actions, using some coordination device such as convention.]

A convention is:

1. a regularity in behavior, e.g. producing a string of sounds
2. that is partly arbitrary [a. other regularities in behavior would be approximately equally preferable by almost everyone in the community]
3. that is common ground in a community
4. as a coordination device [a. almost everyone in the community conforms to it] [b. almost everyone expects almost everyone else to conform to it] [c. almost everyone would prefer any additional member of the community to conform to it if almost everyone in the community already conforms to it] [d. almost everyone would prefer any new member of the community to conform to another regularity if almost everyone in the community were already conforming to it]
5. for a recurrent coordination problem, e.g. communicating a meaning

So for a metaphor to be conventional, the metaphorical mapping of concepts (and corresponding linguistic forms) from source to target domain would have to be common ground in a community as a coordination device for a recurrent coordination problem. Note that the subheadings, from Lewis, indicate that conventionality comes in degrees: indeed, the propagation of a linguistic innovation, such as a novel metaphor, is the adoption of it as a convention of the speech community. Convention is a social phenomenon, unlike entrenchment: a convention is entrenched in a speaker's mind because of its use in the community.

In particular occasions of use, however, linguistic convention is never enough for communication to succeed: one must always use nonconventional coordination devices, most often joint salience and features of the common ground between interlocutors. Clark (and Lewis) do not really bring out this point, but it is explicit in Relevance Theory (under the term "enrichment"), and I also argue for it in *Explaining Language Change* (pp. 99-104). I also argue that there is no sharp line between convention and innovation, because construing a coordination problem (communicating a meaning) as a recurrent instance of a prior coordination problem (previous use of language) is, well, a matter of construal.

How can a linguist decide whether a metaphor is conventional? There is no easy way, and little or no research that I know of on the topic (please direct me to any!). I make a few suggestions in "Linguistic evidence and mental representations" (Cog Lx 9:151-73, 1998), and Ray Gibbs and Teenie Matlock make better suggestions—and qualifications—in their reply, "Psycholinguistics and mental representations" (Cog Lx 10.263-69, 1999).

**Matthew Anstey (ansteyfamily@OPTUSNET.COM.AU)**

**Tue, 19 Nov 2002**

*How can a linguist decide whether a metaphor is conventional? There is no easy way, and little or no research that I know of on the topic (please direct me to any!).*

*The Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002) has several interesting articles about literal vs. non-literal/metaphoric/figurative language, from the perspectives of philosophy, linguistics, and psycholinguistics. Ariel and Gibbs (in separate articles) in particular discuss psycholinguistic research regarding processing of metaphors and non-metaphors, and although they don't address directly the question of conventionality, they do address the question of salience, which has been shown to be of heuristic value to psycholinguistic theories of metaphor comprehension.

**J L Speranza (jls@netverk.com.ar)**

**Mon Nov 25 2002**

Bill Croft writes:

*Convention is perhaps the most neglected fundamental property of language. [...] How can a linguist decide whether a metaphor is conventional? There is no easy way, and little or no research that I know of on the topic (please direct me to any!).*

*Convention is perhaps the most neglected fundamental property of language.*

Is it? I mean, is it a *fundamental* property? It does not seem to be, in any case, a fundamental property of *meaning per se*, at least for the self-avowed Gricean. Cf.:

One of the leading ideas in my treatment of meaning [is] that meaning is not to be regarded exclusively, or even PRIMARILY, as a feature of language or of linguistic utterances. There are many instances of non-linguistic vehicles of communication, mostly unstructured but sometimes exhibiting at least rudimentary structure; and my account of meaning [is] designed to allow for the possibility that non-linguistic and indeed NON-CONVENTIONAL 'utterances', perhaps even manifesting some degree of structure, might be within the powers of creatures who lack any linguistic OR OTHERWISE CONVENTIONAL apparatus for communication, but who are not thereby deprived of the capacity to MEAN this or that by things they do.

H. P. Grice, 'Reply to Richards', in Richard Grandy & Richard Warner, *PGRICE, Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*. Clarendon, p. 85.

Or:

It seems to me that there are ... different problems connected with meaning in which questions of value might arise. [A] minor problem has to do with the realtion what ... I may call [expression] meaning and [utterer] meaning. It seems plausible to suppose that to say that an [expression] means something (to say that 'John is a bachelor' means that John is an unmarried male, or whatever it is) is to be somehow understood in terms of what particular users of that expression mean on particular occasions. The first possible construal of this is rather crude: namely, that usually people DO use this expression in this way. A construal which seems to me rather BETTER is that IT IS CONVENTIONAL to use this expression in this way. Now, I do not think that even the most subtle or sophisticated interpretation of this construal will do, because I do not think that meaning is ESSENTIALLY connected with convention. What is essentially connected with is some way of FIXING what [an expression means]: convention is indeed one of these ways, but it is not the only one. I can invent a language, call it Deutero-Esperanto, which nobody ever speaks. That makes me the authority, and I can lay down what is proper. ... The general suggestion would therefore be that to say what an [expression] means ... is to say what is in general OPTIMAL for speakers ... to do with that [expression]. As regards what is OPTIMAL in any PARTICULAR kind of case, there would have to be a cash value, an account of WHY this is optimal. For example, it might be that IT IS CONVENTIONAL to use this [expression] in this way. ... What we get in every case, as a unification of all these accounts, is the optimality or propriety of a certain form of behaviour.

Grice, WOW, *Studies in the way of words*, p. 299. Originally in  
“Meaning Revisited”, in N. V. Smith, ed. *Mutual Knowledge*, London:  
Academic Press.

It’s interesting that for Grice metaphor is always, notably NON-CONVENTIONAL.  
His only example in *’-Logic and Conversation* (now WOW, p. 34) being:

“You are the cream in my coffee” ⇒ [roughly] You are my pride and joy.

I.e. metaphor comes out as a non-conventional (indeed “conversational”) implicature,  
never as a conventional one. He was never sure what a *conventional* implicature would  
look like but he looked (unlike Karttunen) for other types of cases as illustrations of  
this (“therefore”, “but”, as e.g. in WOW, p. 120).

Metaphor would be a *conversational* (and thus nonconventional) implicature be-  
cause it derives from the *conversational* maxims (notably “Quality”): thus, Grice al-  
lows that there may be maxims, other than what he dubs “conversation”, which may  
generate non-conventional implicatures; metaphor (being so basic) is not one of these:

There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral  
in character) . . . that are also normally observed by participants in talk ex-  
changes, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures. The  
conversational maxims, however, and the conversational implicatures con-  
nected with them [incl. metaphor], are, specially connected (I hope) with  
the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve  
and is primarily employed to serve. I have stated my maxims as if this  
purpose were a maximally efficient exchange of information.

Grice, WOW, p. 28.

**Larry Gorbet (lgorbet@unm.edu)**

**Mon Nov 25 2002**

I fail to see how Grice’s comments disagree with what Croft wrote. The latter com-  
ments on convention as basic to language, and Grice is explicitly talking about mean-  
ing in general (not just in language). I would suspect that Croft doesn’t take meaning  
to be limited to language, unless it is by definition.

Certainly some cognitivists have treated conventionalization as an essential part of  
the process by which conceptualizations in general become linguistic “meanings”.

To me, the very essence of that part of language that we conveniently label the lex-  
icon is that it conventionally associates conventional forms with conventional mean-  
ings. If I have no idea what other members of my speech community take to be con-  
ventional meanings of a form I use, how can I figure out the problem of what my  
use of that form in this linguistic context and in this particular situation will mean for  
them? Even though convention doesn’t lead algorithmically to situational meaning, it  
is a necessary component to reducing the task of comprehension to a (barely) doable  
one.

**From: J L Speranza (jls@netverk.com.ar)**

**Mon Nov 25 2002**

Isn't this a picture of what Relevance-Theorists have criticised as "the code-based model" versus the "inference-based model" built on Gricean lines that they adopt?

In any case, and, for the record, I note that I omitted what I think is yet another perhaps interesting use of "conventional" as used by Grice in his attempt at formalising what "meaning" is about.

When providing his very *general* definition of, granted, "mean" (as ascribed to "utterer", even) he does provide for a variable "c", which is to stand for a "mode of correlation".

Amongst the "modes of correlation", he does list "conventional", but only along with alternative ones such as "iconic" and "associative".

Ranges of variables f: features of utterance c: modes of correlation (such as iconic, associative, CONVENTIONAL).

WOW, p. 103

"U means by uttering x that p" is true iff (E.Phi)(E.f)(E.c) [i.e. there exists a feature phi, a feature f, and a mode of correlation c] I. U utters x intending x to be such that anyone who has phi would think that 1. x has f. 2. f IS CORRELATED IN WAY C with psi-ing that p [having psychological attitude psi with content p. JLS] 3. (E. Phi'): U intends x to be such that anyone who has Phi' would think, via thinking (1) and (2), that U psi-s that p. 4. In view of (3), U psi-s that p. and II. (operative only for certain substituends for "asterisk sub-psi" [qua mode-marker. JLS]). U utters x intending that, should there actually be anyone who has Phi, he would via thinking (4) himself psi that p; and III. It is not the case that, for some inference element E, U intends x to be such that anyone who has phi will both 1'. rely on E in coming to psi that p. 2'. Think that (E.Phi'): U intends x to be such that anyone who has Phi' will come to psi that p WITHOUT relying on E.

Grice, WOW, p. 114).

Given that for Grice, ultimately, *metaphor* belongs in *utterer's* meaning (WOW, p. 34), how much of metaphor may not be said to be *associativity*-based rather than *convention*-based, for example? ("You're the cream in my coffee"  $\Rightarrow$  (roughly) "You are my pride and joy").

Gorbet:

*If I have no idea what other members of my speech community take to be conventional meanings of a form I use, how can I figure out the problem of what my use of that form in this linguistic context and in this particular situation will mean for them?*

Well, a famous Gricean take “against convention” is again essayed by Davidson in his contribution to PGRICE, ed. Grandy. He does think there is a way:

I conclude that there is no such thing as A LANGUAGE, not if A LANGUAGE is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how CONVENTION in any IMPORTANT sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.

(Davidson in Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: intentions, categories, ends, p. 174).

And, mind, he’s not just talking about metaphor, is he.

**Sherman Wilcox (wilcox@unm.edu)**  
**Tue Nov 26 2002**

On 11/25/02, J L Speranza said:

*Isn’t this a picture of what Relevance-Theorists have criticised as “the code-based model” ... ?*

I don’t think it is. Could you say why you do?

*Amongst the “modes of correlation”, he does list “conventional”, but only along with alternative ones such as “iconic” and “associative”.*

I’d be very interested in your take on how Grice thinks iconicity and convention interact. Or, if they are “alternative” mode of correlation, does this imply that they do NOT interact?

*Well, a famous Gricean take “against convention” is again essayed by Davidson in his contribution to PGRICE, ed. Grandy. He does think there is a way:*

I conclude that there is no such thing as A LANGUAGE, not if A LANGUAGE is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how CONVENTION in any IMPORTANT sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.

(Davidson in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: intentions, categories*, ends, p. 174).

This is pretty intriguing. I admit to knowing not a stitch of Davidson. And so I have no idea if I understand what he means by convention, or whether it is what Larry Gorbet, and I (and other cognitive linguists, I would assume) mean by convention.

Could you tell me: (1) what does Davidson mean by convention, and (2) if we give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions, how then DO we communicate?

**From: J L Speranza (jls@netverk.com.ar)**  
**Tue Nov 26 2002**

S. Wilcox refers to L. Gorbet's description pertaining to the various "conventions" associated with the workings of "the lexicon", and writes:

*I don't think [Gorbet's description] is [an instance of the often-criticised 'code-based' model of communication.] Could you say why you do?*

Well, in the code-model, the correlation between a "linguistic" form and what Gorbet calls a "conventional" meaning is pre-patterned, pre-established, fixed, "ready-made". No role at all for inference. For the inference-model, even this "fixing" should allow for a large amount of principled "reasoning".

*I'd be very interested in your take on how Grice thinks iconicity and convention interact. Or, if they are "alternative" mode of correlation, does this imply that they do NOT interact?*

Precisely, the iconic and the conventional modes of correlation do NOT interact. It is obvious that, if x means y via the ICONIC mode of correlation, then ~(x means y via the CONVENTIONAL mode of correlation). I would think that all onomatopoeia in English (and for that matter, Chinese) belong in this area. I don't subscribe to the Merriam-Webster, but found this in their site: <http://www.m-w.com/service/etymology.htm>

Imitation of sounds Words can be created by onomatopoeia, the naming of things by a more or less exact reproduction of the sound associated with it. Words such as "buzz", "his", "guffaw", "whiz", and "pop") are of imitative origin.

NOTE:

You can use the Etymology search in the dictionary to find a list of words created via onomatopoeia. At the dictionary search page, select the Etymology search option, type "imitative" in the input box, and click the "Search" button.

I would think that clicking the search button like that would give us a grand display of how much of the "linguistic" meanings we live by are in no really interesting way conventional.

Referring to Davidson, op.cit., p. 174,

*This is pretty intriguing. I admit to knowing not a stitch of Davidson. And so I have no idea if I understand what he means by convention, or whether it is what Larry Gorbet, and I (and other cognitive linguists, I would assume) mean by convention. Could you tell me: (1) what does Davidson mean by convention, and (2) if we give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions, how then DO we communicate?*

I would guess (but mind, only *guess*) that what Prof. Davidson means by “convention” is more like what Bill Croft means by convention which is more or less what D. K. Lewis meant by convention in his Harvard book, which was more or less what “he” previously meant by convention in his Harvard PhD under W. V. O. Quine, "Conventions OF LANGUAGE".

I think Lewis’s attempt was brilliant when it comes to, for example, the feature of ARBITRARINESS (i.e., in Gricean parlance: NON-ICONICITY):

if x means y via the CONVENTIONAL mode of correlation, then x means y ARBITRARILY.

On the other hand, I think Lewis went somehow over the top by requiring “common-ground status” to the whole proceedings. Why, I can certainly establish a “convention” I myself will abide with. That should not mean that, to fulfil Lewis’s commonground status (of “mutual” or “common” knowledge) that I should **know** that I **know** that I know that (and so on ad infinitum) that x means y via the “conventional” mode of correlation, does it.

In any case, Davidson’s pretty “deconstructionist” piece in the Gricean festschrift is rather general (it’s a pity Grice did not discuss it in print). Davidson’s take on convention is expressed in what he finds the “third” misguided “principle” in much philosophy and linguistics:

MISGUIDED principle P-3: “First meanings” [by which he means the truth-conditional side to content, as per a Tarski-schema] are governed by learned conventions (or regularities). The systematic knowledge or competence of the speaker or interpreter is learned IN ADVANCE OF OCCASIONS OF INTERPRETATION and is \*CONVENTIONAL\* in character.

Davidson, op. cit., p. 161.

It is the combination of this principle with two other principles that ‘build’ up the altogether wrong picture of the thing:

Misguided principle P1: First meaning is systematic  
Misguided principle P2: First meanings are shared.

Wilcox:

*if we give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions, how then DO we communicate?*



Well, Davidson holds this to be, precisely, an open question. Perhaps expecting that there is a “theory” that will account for how we communicate is the wrong answer altogether to an ill-formulated question.

In the essay, Davidson attempts to formulate, however, what he dubs a “passing theory”, as opposed to a “prior” theory (of interpretation).

I have distinguished what I have been calling the prior theory [as when semanticists talk of ‘truth-theory’ for a Language L. JLS] and what I shall henceforth call the PASSING theory. For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared IN ADVANCE to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he DOES interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he BELIEVES the interpreter’s prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he INTENDS the interpreter to use.

op. cit., p. 165

Davidson concludes that while P1 and P2 can be reformulated in various ways, this is not so with the *really* misguided P3:

The problem we have been grappling with depends on the assumption that communication by speech requires that speaker and interpreter have learned or somehow acquired a common method (or theory) of interpretation—as being able to operate on the basis of SHARED CONVENTIONS, rules, or regularities. The problem arose when we realised [in discussing malaprops, metaphor, and such] that no method (or theory) fits this bill. The solution to the problem is clear. In linguistic communication nothing corresponds to a linguistic competence AS OFTEN DESCRIBED, i.e. as summarised by principles (1)–(3). The solution is to GIVE UP the principles. Principles (1) and (2) SURVIVE when understood in rather unusual ways, but principle (3) cannot stand, AND IT IS UNCLEAR what can take its place.

Davidson had previously referred to the work of Grice:

Grice has done more than anyone else to bring these problems [of interpretation of ‘implicature’ and stuff. JLS] to our attention and to help sort them out. . . . He has explored the general ‘principles’ behind our ability to figure out such implicatures, and these principles must, of course, be ‘known’ to speakers who expect to be taken up on them. Whether ‘knowledge’ of these principles [the cooperative principle, e.g. JLS] ought to be INCLUDED in the description of linguistic COMPETENCE may not have to be SETTLED: [in any case] they are things A CLEVER PERSON COULD OFTEN FIGURE OUT WITHOUT **PREVIOUS TRAINING OR EXPOSURE**

op. cit., p. 162.

Davidson’s point would be, I guess, that if these sorts of Gricean ‘principles’ can be ‘reasoned out’, there’s no need to endow them with the character of a ‘convention’.

**George Lakoff (lakoff@cogsci.berkeley.edu)**

**Tue Nov 26 2002**

It is nice to see good ol' topics from the 60's—Paul Grice's implicatures and David Lewis' conventionality—taken up again. The phenomena need to be reconsidered seriously within the cognitive linguistics context. But when Sherman Wilcox writes “I admit to knowing not a stitch of Davidson,” I fear that he isn't the only one, and that most folks in the cognitive linguistics tradition may also not know the context of Grice's and Lewis' work either. Since I shared a history with them (they were friends of mine back when I was working on logic), I think a bit that history might be useful—especially since it is relevant to the current discussion. Their work cannot now be taken at face value and has to be thought of in a historical perspective, for reasons that will become clear below.

Paul Grice's lectures on implicature (*Language and Conversation*) were given as the William James Lectures at Harvard in 1967. I was teaching there at the time and I attended. David Lewis was a grad student there and, I believe, he was in the room too. Grice's intent was conservative. Strawson had given lots of examples showing the inadequacy of Russell's symbolic logic in general and his Theory of Descriptions in particular. Grice was defending Russell. His argument was that you could keep Russellian logic for semantics and truth conditions, while getting the real natural language examples right by adding a theory of conversation on top of the logic. Since I was trying to incorporate logic and pragmatics into linguistics at the time (1967), I became enamored of Paul's work. He, however, refused to publish it. I managed to get a copy and distributed over 1,000 copies through the linguistic underground by 1973, and also managed to get chapter 2 published in the Cole-Morgan volume on *Speech Acts* in 1975. (The story involves a bar in Austin, Texas.)

Paul was an objectivist who insisted that all meaning was literal. Nonetheless, much of Paul's work was insightful—although his one metaphor example was pitifully analyzed. The only way Paul's theory could deal with metaphor was to claim that metaphors had a literal meaning conveyed via implicature. Searle later tried applying this idea in his paper on metaphor in the Ortony volume, a disastrous attempt.

During the 70's, Paul's work became taken very seriously by those trying to keep formal logic as a theory of thought—with the result that it got reinterpreted—for good reason. Gazdar did a formalization within logic of the maxim of quantity in his dissertation. Grice's student Deirdre Wilson (she had typed his manuscript) realized that all the maxims could be seen as instances of relevance. Her theory of relevance also tried to preserve formal logic as a theory of semantics. When Fillmore formulated frame semantics, I realized that relevance—and with it Gricean implicature—could be handled via frame-based inference with a cognitive linguistics framework. The formal mechanism for doing this precisely did not exist then (the 70's), though it does now—Narayanan's simulation semantics within NTL. It would be a great thesis topic for someone to work out the technical details now that a technical mechanism is available.

David Lewis' Harvard dissertation on *Convention* was a product of the same era—1968, if I remember correctly. David was also an objectivist—of the most extreme variety. It's worth taking a look at his essay in the Davidson-Harman volume of the *Semantics of Natural Language*, where he argues that meaning has nothing to do with psychology—neither mind nor brain. For David, meaning could only be a correspon-

dence between formal symbols and the objective world, where the objective world was taken as being modeled via settheoretical models. The symbols were to be linked to the world-models via some mathematical function. For human languages, that function he claimed was determined by convention—which is why he wrote his thesis on the topic. But “convention” could not be a matter of human psychology for David; it had to be objective as well. David’s idea was to use the economic theory of his time—utility theory—to provide what he took as an objectivist account of convention, since utility was seen as something objective in the world. The irony here, of course, is that Danny Kahneman, my former cognitive science colleague at Berkeley—now at Princeton—just won the Nobel Prize in economics for proving that such a view of economics cannot be maintained. The examples he used were cases that revealed how people really reason: by prototype, frame, and metaphor—the staples of cognitive linguistics.

David’s work, like Paul’s, was insightful, despite the objectivist intellectual tradition in which it was embedded. They were both super-smart people who transcended the theories they were brought up with. Both theories were exemplary products of their time, the late 60’s (a period I enjoyed and am particularly fond of). But the intellectual tradition in which the theories were embedded cannot be taken seriously today, and so the work cannot be taken at face value. The theories were formulated before the age of cognitive science and neuroscience. We now know from those fields that objectivism is false (see the survey in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* and the update in *Philosophy in the Flesh*). We know that every aspect of thought and language works through human brains, which are structured to run bodies and which create understandings that are not objectively true of the world.

Metaphor is an important part of this story. The neural theory of metaphor (see *PITF*) explains how the system of conceptual metaphor is learned, why certain conceptual metaphors are universal and others are not, why the system is structured around primary metaphor, why metaphor acquisition works as it does, why conceptual metaphors preserve image-schemas, why metaphorical inference works as it does, and why conceptual metaphors tend to take sensory-motor concepts as conceptual source domains and non-sensory-motor concepts as targets.

Convention also makes sense only in neural terms. What each of us takes as conventional must be instantiated in our synapses. The question is, what is the mechanism? In some cases, the usage-based theories of gradual entrenchment may make sense. For other cases, they don’t. Metaphor is a case where those theories make no sense, as I pointed out in my previous note. The old entrenchment theories simply cannot explain what the neural theory of metaphor explains.

Bill Croft asks, “How can a linguist decide whether a metaphor is conventional?” and he claims, “There is no easy way, and little or no research that I know of on the topic (please direct me to any!).” It is true that there is no easy way. The work is hard. But there is a huge amount of research on the topic. I refer him to chapter 6 of *Philosophy in the Flesh* (pp. 81–87), where nine forms of convergent evidence are listed—and to the references at the end of the book, where massive literature on the research is cited. Croft himself, for all his many accomplishments, is, to my knowledge, not a metaphor researcher. For those who are, there’s a lot to know.

In summary: Cognitive linguistics is committed to being consistent with what is known about the brain and the mind. That changes over time, and cognitive linguistics

must change with it. Entrenched ideas about entrenchment may have to change as well. The ideas of Paul Grice and David Lewis from the 60's cannot just be taken over into cognitive linguistics as they were formulated. They cannot be taken at face value. They have to be rethought on the basis of what has been learned since. This is not just true of Grice and Lewis. My old work on generative semantics from the 60's had lots of neat insights as well. But they too have to be rethought. Some can be translated into cognitive linguistics—others cannot. None of this is easy or obvious. It is important to know the history of all this work. Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.

**Larry Gorbet (lgorbet@unm.edu)**  
**Tue Nov 26 2002**

I wrote

*I fail to see how Grice's comments disagree with what Croft wrote. ... Certainly some cognitivists have [however] treated conventionalization as an essential part of the process by which conceptualizations in general become linguistic "meanings". To me, the very essence of that part of language that we conveniently label THE LEXICON is that it conventionally associates conventional forms with conventional meanings. If I have no idea what other members of my speech community take to be conventional meanings of a form I use, how can I figure out the problem of what my use of that form in this linguistic context and in this particular situation will mean for them? Even though convention doesn't lead algorithmically to situational meaning, it is a necessary component to reducing the task of comprehension to a (barely) doable one.*

and J L Speranza commented

*Isn't this a picture of what Relevance-Theorists have criticised as 'the code-based model' versus the 'inference-based model' built on Gricean lines that they adopt?*

I don't think it is at all. The inferences of Gricean analysis don't exist in a vacuum (as no inference can, of course). One component of those inferences—not by a long, long shot, of course, the only one—is knowledge of linguistic convention. As I process the quotation from Speranza immediately above, I make use of all sorts of knowledge of linguistics and linguistic theorizing plus a variety of methods of inference and assumptions about the writer's possible intent. But all that is utterly incapable of leading me to any semblance of understanding unless I also utilize my belief that the term "Relevance-Theorists" has a certain meaning (well, a certain set of related meanings) that is shared by a community of users of English. Knowledge of linguistic conventions. And if my beliefs about how various bits of language are shared are erroneous, my inferences will be faulty just as they would be if other relevant beliefs (e.g. about language use or intentions) were erroneous.

As for onomatopoeic forms (e.g. English *buzz*), they are not arbitrary, but they most certainly are conventional. I am quite capable of saying instead [zz], with no

vowel, but I don't, and the reason is because *buzz* is the conventional form for representing that sound and \*\_zz\_ is not. Even though the latter is a more accurate imitation.

**Jordan Zlatev (Jordan.Zlatev@ling.lu.se)**

**Wed Nov 27 2002**

George Lakoff writes:

*Convention also makes sense only in neural terms. What each of us takes as conventional must be instantiated in our synapses. The question is, what is the mechanism? In some cases, the usage-based theories of gradual entrenchment may make sense. For other cases, they don't. Metaphor is a case where those theories make no sense, as I pointed out in my previous note. The old entrenchment theories simply cannot explain what the neural theory of metaphor explains.*

I wish to disagree. And furthermore suggest that not only metaphor theory, but cognitive linguistics in general lacks a proper understanding of the concept of "convention" (or the closely related one, "norm"), which I consider as THE most fundamental concept for explaining language, pace "Relevance-Theorists" and in agreement with Larry Gorbet.

The reason for the above claim is that, as Bill Croft also points out, convention is a social, rather than an individual, and even less so a NEURAL phenomenon. The three levels of social-normative, individual-mental and neural-physical are categorically (and ontologically) distinct, if interrelated, corresponding to Popper's "three worlds" (cf. *Objective Knowledge* 1962).

The one who has worked out the implications of this for modern linguistics best (to my knowledge) is Esa Itkonen, well-known among "functional", but unfortunately not "cognitive" linguists. Below I quote from a brief article (which I use in my Semantics class), where Esa defends Frege's Sinn from cogling critiques, summarises the thesis of the "social ontology of meaning" (and language in general) and returns the critique back to cognitive linguistic approaches of reducing meaning to "image schemas" or the like:

It is the basic tenet of Itkonen (1978) and (1983) that language is primarily a normative entity. The grammarian does not describe what is said or how it is understood, but what ought to be said or how it ought to be understood. And because the norms (or rules) of language determine these "ought"-aspects cannot be individual (as shown by Wittgenstein's private-language argument), they must be social. Social norms do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather "supported by" individual persons and, thus, by individual minds. Language as a social and normative entity is investigated by "autonomous linguistics" [P.S. Esa means Panini not Chomsky! JZ] ... Language as a non-social (= individual-psychological) and non-normative entity is investigated by "psycholinguistics". Yet even if both socio-linguistics and psycholinguistics investigate what happens, rather than what ought to happen, they have to view their data through the spectacles provided by autonomous linguistics.

George finishes:

*Some can be translated into cognitive linguistics—others cannot. None of this is easy or obvious. It is important to know the history of all this work. Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.*

With this I agree completely. But hopefully, “cognitive linguistics” will be rethought as well in the process . . .

**George Lakoff (lakoff@cogsci.berkeley.edu)**

**Wed Nov 27 2002**

That there is a social component to many norms is unquestioned. But there is also a neural component. You can't have a conceptual metaphor without it being characterized in your brain. In the case of PRIMARY conceptual metaphors—the ones that are learned by functioning in the world regardless of culture—the neurally embodied component is the major one and the cultural component appears to play a minor role at best. Yet these primary metaphors are part of one's “conventional” language use and are also part of the “norms.”

In short, you can't have a PURELY socio-cultural notion of convention for conventional metaphors.

This is a very big deal in developing a cognitive sociology and anthropology. Lewis' attempt to use utility has failed—as Kahneman's work shows. Do you know anything to replace it? Is there any viable theory of socio-cultural convention at present—one that take the neural contribution into account?

**From: Jordan Zlatev (Jordan.Zlatev@ling.lu.se) Date: Wed Nov 27 2002—18:05:32 PST**

Dear George, (and Cogling!)

In order to answer your question, we need to first clarify some terminology. For me (and Popper, Itkonen, Clark etc) a norm or convention is an object of common knowledge, not just “shared”, but “known to be shared” (minimally) in a community. It requires reflexive knowledge, and this distinguishes it from a simple “regularity of behavior”, which doesn't. (There are differences and difficulties in characterizing common (mutual) knowledge, but these not concern us here.) This kind of knowledge implies both self-consciousness, and other-consciousness (“theory-of-mind”). Now there are good socio-cultural arguments, from Vygotsky to Tomasello, to believe social experience is a necessary condition for the development of self/other-consciousness. If so, there can be *no such thing as a non-social norm or convention*. So it is not just that society is a “component” for “many” norms, it is (I believe) a condition for any norms, linguistic norms in particular.

But notice that this does not mean that one need to adopt a “purely socio-cultural approach” to metaphor, or to language in general, if by that is meant one which declares biology irrelevant. It does however mean that what you call “primary metaphors”,

(hypothetical) mappings between domains of experience established by physical experience, if I understand correctly, are not conventional per se (as I am using the term), but serve as the ground/motivation on which convention does its thing. That is how we get both the near universal general patterns, and the substantial language-specific differences. That is the approach I tried to follow in my 1997-book “Situated Embodiment” and which I am refining in my present work, but let me skip further self-advertisements.

Instead, I can off-hand refer to at least five ongoing attempts to integrate (neuro)biology and culture in the attempt to explain the “emergence” of conventions in general, and language in particular: Chris Sinha’s *Language and Representation* 1988, Terry Deacon’s *The Symbolic Species* 1996, Merlin Donald’s *The Origin of the Modern Mind* 1991, Katherin Nelson’s *The emergence of the mediated mind* 1996 and Mike Tomasello’s, *The cultural origins of human cognition*, 1999. (This doesn’t mean that they are (all) right, but there is at least a lot of work going on!) My current favorite is the last one—a very good argument that the basic human BIOLOGICAL adaptation compared to other primates is one for living SOCIALLY. I consider it likely that this is also the crucial “neural component” for learning conventions . . .

Let me end here, and express my hope that others who like me have felt that the notion of convention has been underrepresented, to say it mildly, in cognitive linguistics to join the discussion. Thank you, George, for reacting, and Bill Croft for starting the discussion in the first place.