Falling into Place: Conceptual Metaphor and Western Academic Culture*

Joan Turner

Goldsmiths' College, University of London

Metaphor and Western Culture

Since Aristotle, the common conception of metaphor has been that it is an ornamental use of language, a major rhetorical device used to enhance or embellish the literal meaning of something. This understanding of metaphor locates it firmly in the realm of the imagination, set against the 'real' world, the world of the literal, of truth. Within this culturally evolved dichotomy, the literal is privileged over the metaphorical, as is truth over rhetoric, as is the scientific over the literary. However, in more recent cultural history, this dichotomy and its hierarchical ordering has been upset by an upsurge of interest in and reevaluation of the role of metaphor (see, for example Ortony, ed. 1979).

The nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche can be said to have set the tone for new approaches to evaluating culture with his much-quoted phrase: 'truth is a mobile army of metaphors' (quoted in Nehamas, 1985). In other words, truth was no more than what the dominant metaphors controlling thought at any one time said it was. The traditional conception of the human mind gaining control of nature by finding out the truth of how it operated was upset by entertaining the possibility that human beings in their collectivity created their own reality.

This constructivist line of thinking has borne fruit in most disciplines in the twentieth century and can be encapsulated as a metaphorical shift from the importance of 'finding' to the preeminence of 'making'.

This dichotomy still characterises debates on contemporary culture, the most dramatic of which take the impossibility of finding the absolute truth for granted, a

premiss which fuels theories on what Lyotard (1984) has termed the 'postmodern condition'.

Everyday Metaphors

Despite the fact that 'Truth' has as it were been knocked off its pedestal, the truth-seeking culture which has been underway for more than 2000 years has left its mark on the lexicon. Its pervasive influence can be seen in the metaphors and networks of metaphors that sustain its value system. These metaphors are everyday metaphors in the sense with which Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) 'Metaphors we live by' has made us familiar. They are not perceived as metaphors in the Aristotelian sense, but as 'conventional' metaphors, structuring our mental activities in terms of physical senses and actions, such as 'seeing' what is meant, and 'grasping' the meaning of something.

What I want to focus on here are those metaphors that structure the conceptualisations of truth and knowledge that permeate academic discourses. These metaphors show a systematicity of evaluation, with certain qualities such as firmness, smoothness, straightness, viewed positively and their opposites, negatively.

This evaluation is most noticeable in expressions where what is being described is obviously a deviation from the norm. For example, when we talk of 'papering over the cracks', the underlying assumption is that a smooth, unbroken surface is the ideal. This conceptual preference for flatness, smoothness, or straightness, is revealed in the general desirability of 'level playing fields', of dealing with people who are 'on the level'; in the preferable avoidance of 'slippery slopes', or 'slippery customers' and the insecurity of 'sliding signifiers' (see Derrida, 1976). In fact, it is in 'taking the ground from under the feet' of the assumption of fixed meaning that Derrida and others have helped to reveal the conceptual reliance on 'firm ground' which has characterised the western truth-seeking tradition. I would like to suggest that networks of such conceptual metaphors act as 'rhetorical prototypes' in the construction and evaluation of academic discourse. First of all though, let's take a look at the background to prototype theory.

Prototype Theory

Prototype theory, associated principally with the cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch (see Rosch, 1975, Rosch & Lloyd, 1978), emphasises the role of best examples in a category. The notion of 'best example' is derived from work on perceptual or natural prototypes such as colours, geometric shapes, or birds. The 'best examples' are those rated best by informants from the same language or cultural background. So, for

example robins are better examples of the category 'bird' than penguins are; a chair is a better example of the category 'furniture' than a wardrobe is; the lexical item 'stare' is a better example of looking than 'peer' or 'squint' (Pulman, 1983). Such ranking can vary crossculturally. For example Japanese speakers of English rank 'cupboard' as a better example of furniture than English native speakers do, Chinese speakers do not always rate a goose as a bird, (Aitchison, 1992).

One of the main values of the notion of 'prototype' is that it locates the analysis of a phenomenon with the observer or human agent, rather than assuming the objective reality of the phenomenon outside of the human mind. This recognition is central to the system of 'experiential realism' which George Lakoff (1987) opposes to the 'objectivist' paradigm of language and mind. Objectivism sustains the classical view of categorisation, where category membership is clearly defined by the fulfilment of necessary and sufficient conditions, dictated by a pre-existing reality.

This classical view of categorisation is an essential part of the truth-seeking tradition in as much as the major method of finding the truth is that of analysis, clearly demarcating the structure of reality in terms of its various elements. The rhetorical value of this forward-thrusting, analytical dynamic can be seen in positively evaluated phrases such as 'pushing back the frontiers of knowledge', 'at the cutting edge', 'incisive account'.

The aim of analytical clarity also structures the language of logic revealed in terms such as 'category error', 'inconsistency' and 'necessary and sufficient conditions'. This latter phrase particularly emphasises the value placed on 'goodness of fit' or the clear matching of an explanation with what it is explaining. Such language and the value system it embodies is very deeply embedded in the repertoire of academic discourse, policing the value of knowledge claims regardless of the specific discipline.

The classical conception of categories, whose validity has been questioned by prototype theory, is thus ironically itself a prototype of a culturally preferred way of doing things.

Cultural Prototypes

Cultural prototypes are those facets of a social or cultural phenomenon that are taken as 'best examples' of that phenomenon. For example, church spires, buildings made of stone or brick, the shape of the cross, angels, form part of the cultural iconography of Europe. There are of course variations in different parts of Europe regarding the colour of the stone or brick and the frequency of occurrence or identity of the icons. There is for example a greater prevalence of the Virgin Mary in predominantly catholic areas e.g. southern Europe, as opposed to northern Europe. However, such objects are prototypical examples of western cultural iconography. This is the case even if Christianity does not play as predominant a role in cultural life as it once did. Its artefacts still exert a noticeable presence, particularly so if you come from a country with

a very different cultural iconography. The prototypical European iconography contrasts with that of East Asian pagoda-shaped temples, small stone lanterns placed in parks and gardens, and the ubiquity of wooden houses and archways.

Such visible instances of cultural difference are a useful introduction to the notion of cultural prototypes because of their immediacy, their easy accessibility in terms of cultural contrast. The semantic representation of 'place of worship' is likely to call up very different visual images for someone living in Japan as opposed to someone living in Britain, even though the function is similar.

Another area where the notion of cultural prototypes is easily identified is food. It does not take long for the tourist anywhere in the world to categorise the indigenous diet as rice-based, potato-based, or flour-based.

Where cultural prototypes become more difficult to discern is when they are mental rather than physical. Just as we are unaware of the organisation of words in our mental lexicon, although we use them in a split-second, both productively and receptively, (see for an overview of the whole area, Aitchison, 1987), we have mental models or mental representations of social processes which we use unconsciously in making judgments, and taking action. Whether in the case of a word, such as 'week', or a social practice, such as marriage, there are certain prototypical representations of what they mean, even though are not always borne out in practice. For example, for most British people, a week means 5 weekdays (or working days) and a weekend (Saturday and Sunday). So when I tell students that they can use the language laboratory every day at a certain time, I do not expect to get the question, as I once did: 'does that mean we can come in on Sundays?' I am now very careful to spell out the days of the week and the times, without taking my model of what every day means in this context, for granted.

According to a study by Quinn (1987), American women discuss marriage in terms of an idealised model: that marriage is enduring. The difficulties they experience within their marriages are evaluated against this anchoring notion.

As with the examples of cultural iconography, such prototypical examples may not be the most relevant in the lives of individual people but their 'goodness of example' nature is the backcloth against which experience of marriage is rated.

Rhetorical Prototypes and Normative Evaluation in Academic Discourse

What I principally want to illustrate here is how western academic culture is permeated by the effects of the classiscal conception of categories or 'categorical fixity' and that those effects have created 'rhetorical prototypes' in the lexicon. This means that there are numerous words, phrases, fixed expressions, in the language whose rhetorical force, that is persuasive effect, converges on the values dictated by 'categorical fixity'. The lexical expression of those values is taken-for-granted as being positive, and not open to question. Such rhetorical prototypes may be treated as effects of what Lakoff

(1987) calls 'idealised cognitive models' or ICMs. Just as 'time is money', or 'anger is a heat-filled container' are propositional models orienting our cultural attitudes to time and anger, the value system which characterises western academic culture is the result of the centrality of the following cognitive models: things should have their 'proper place', or 'fall into' the right category; arguments or theories should 'stand on firm ground'; purpose should be clearly defined. They work to rhetorical effect by virtue of their taken-for-granted goodness as moulders of academic discourse.

'Rhetorical prototypes' are second-order prototypes when considered against the natural, perceptible, shapes and categories that gave rise to prototype theory. They do not identify concretely existing objects or human actions, but interpretive constructs embedded in a conceptual culture which has evolved over at least 2000 years. The predominance of those interpretive constructs is the result of the intellectual dominance of metaphysical thought over this period.

I want to centre the interpretive constructs of academic discourse on three 'turns of phrase' that encapsulate their value system. They are: 'falling into place'; 'getting to the point'; and 'it stands to reason'. These phrases act as 'rhetorical prototypes' representing a value system whose entrance point could be made with numerous other positively weighted lexis. The phrases themselves are not prototypes of a category in the way that robins are of birds, but symptomatic of a rhetorical system that acts prototypically on our mode of interpretation.

Falling into Place

The phrase 'falling into place' has a sense of pre-determined rightness, of things being meant to work out the way they did, as if their 'proper place' was there waiting for them all the time. Whether it's a fictional detective solving a mystery when everything 'falls into place', when there's no longer 'something missing', something yet to be 'filled in', or whether it's someone remarking that 'things are beginning to fall into place', there is a general sense of satisfaction, of things getting better after difficulty of some sort.

The importance of place, of a space with clearly defined boundaries is central to the western analytical tradition, and 'categorical fixity'. Putting things in their proper place is the essence of categorisation. The assumption is that the categorial space is there ready and waiting for the solution of whatever problem is being addressed, to 'fall into'.

Truth and Certainty

Fixity of place is the physical condition which best maps the mental requirement of certainty. Certainty is an absolute requirement of truth and knowledge. The truth-seeking discourses which characterise the western intellectual tradition are therefore articulated in spatial metaphors which embody both the search and the optimal

conditions for knowledge. The 'direction' of the search must be determined and the 'area' of enquiry 'mapped' out. Knowledge claims are territorial in that they are 'staked' out and the 'ground' tested for its firmness and suitability for laying deep foundations. The association of building metaphors with theory 'construction' is recognised in Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) 'Metaphors we live by', but I would suggest that territorial metaphors are the wider rhetorical framework within which building metaphors, as well as the 'argument is war' (Lakoff & Johnson) metaphors fall.

The claims which are made by one band of truthseekers (researchers) may be 'laid bare' by another, and the 'ground cleared' for a new theoretical enterprise. Established theories are broken down and new ones set up in a continuing process of analysis and enquiry. What has kept this process going with its attendant set of values and practices is the assumption of the ultimate possibility of finding the absolute truth or what some philosophers call a 'God's eye view of things'.

Despite the contemporary intellectual challenge to this possibility, academic discourse remains in thrall to the same metaphorical constructs. The notion of 'deconstruction' itself is part of the same metaphorical network, only dismantling rather than setting up. The edifice of 'truth' may no longer stand firm, but the lexeme 'edifice' still enjoys currency. In other words, the cognitive metaphors structuring analytical thought are so deeply embedded that they remain while the superstructure crumbles.

Getting to the Point: structuring the academic essay

'Getting to the point' sums up the demand for clarity and sense of direction in the rhetorical structuring of academic writing. The metaphor 'point' itself neatly encapsulates this predilection. It conveys sharpness, conciseness, and minimal use of space. 'Getting to the point', 'sticking to the point', or 'missing the point' are axiomatic exhortations, or in the latter case a warning, to the student negotiating their way in western academic culture.

Adverse comments on essays reflect this value system. For example, 'you do not focus your ideas clearly enough'; 'this is all over the place'; 'pay more attention to structure'; 'your argument is too loosely drawn' all relate to the demand for focus. In highlighting the importance of comments on essays for building awareness in students of the value system in which they were operating, and gathering other examples from colleagues in professional development workshops on teaching academic writing (Turner, Feb., 1992a & October, 1992b), I found that numerous different comments could all be catalogued as relating to the notion of 'focus' either positively when such comments as 'good, concise analysis', or 'tightly structured' were made, or (more numerously) negatively, where 'lack of focus', or 'looseness of structure' was berated.

Let's look at an example where the rhetorical strategy of repetition is pitted against the requirement for a clear focus. It is rhetorically acceptable in many Asian countries to use repetition as a means of emphasis. In western culture, this may be acceptable in spoken oratory, or in conversation (see Tannen, 1989) but is frowned upon in academic writing, where clarity of focus and linear sense of direction are the best rhetorical means of making a point. A Korean student's initial attempt at drafting an MA proposal was as follows:

<u>What</u> <u>I</u> <u>want</u> <u>to</u> <u>study</u> during the master's course at your college is mass manufactured ceramics, including ....
<u>that</u> <u>is</u> <u>my</u> <u>aim</u> through studying at master's course.
In addition, I'd like to research combining ceramics with other materials such as......
And also, I really want to get an opportunity to.........

The student is obviously clear about what she wants to get out of doing the MA. She is right to emphasise her intentions. However, by repeating the signalling of her intentions, albeit in a different way, she distorts the structural ordering of the piece and the result is a lack of focus.

What is required is a clear indication to the reader at the beginning of the direction her argument will take. For example, as follows:

I have several reasons for wanting to do the MA in industrial ceramics. One is ......
Another is ....
I am particularly interested in......

This is an example of structuring that follows the dicates of a normative preference for linear coherence and tightness of structure, moving from the general to the particular. These attributes of linearity and tightness or being close-knit are commensurate with an idealised cognitive model of cognitive structuring. This model favours the clarity and fixity of a space with clearly defined boundaries and the location of a clear pathway or sense of direction through it. This is the cognitive model of analysis, perhaps the key value that 'getting to the point' enables. Here the metaphor 'point' is valid both for its sense of place and its attribute of sharpness. The 'sharpness' of the mind applying the 'cutting edge' to an area of cognitive space is valued as is the 'sharpness' of focus in communicating the analysis. There is an obvious conceptual link in these two common collocations, one which emphasises the rhetorical weight of 'sharpness'.

Using 'Aristotelian' Metaphor to Reveal Underlying Conceptual Metaphor

Looking at the cultural preference for getting to the point, getting things into their proper perspective, and how it relates to problems non-native speakers of English often have with writing academic essays, I have found it useful to associate key abstract concepts in this process with visual, territorial metaphors.

This draws on the awareness that abstract thought is modelled on concrete experience, but works with concepts not directly related to experiential metaphors. In this case, metaphor is being used as an enabling analogy rather than as a structuring instrument. However, the usefulness of the former results from the primacy of the latter. The analogy that I have chosen is that of a visual journey exploring unknown territory, representing the 'quest for truth' dynamic of western academic discourse. This is reinforced by the use of the hortatory verb 'ascertain' encapsulating the same dynamic, as an acronym pointing out recurring values and strategies pertinent to academic culture generally and to essay writing in particular.

The interrelationships are mapped out in Figure 1 on the next page.

It Stands to Reason

'It stands to reason' is one of those set phrases which you tend not to take apart. However, taking it literally, as it were, the conventional metaphor 'stand' seems to 'stand' in relationship to reason and argumentation in a rhetorically systematic way. That is that the position of standing and the other spatial and action positions that relate to it are conceptually consistent with a positive evaluation.

Standing is a position of stability and of strength, or at least for the wielding of strength, (you can do much more from a standing position and exert more strength than from a sitting position). The physical sense of stability extends to the conceptual sense, which in turn conveys certainty and security. A connection can also be made etymologically with 'stability' deriving from the Latin for 'to stand'. The word 'establish' shares the same etymological derivation and establish means to set something up securely, to make sure that it stands. In the 'image-schematic' configuration of 'setting up' and 'standing' or fixing firmly, there is the assumption of a firm base. Standing is spatially and necessarily linked to 'firm ground' and this is reflected in phrases evaluating arguments such as: 'he's on firmer ground, when......' or 'the argument is on very shaky ground'. The good argument and the good theory need a good standing position. Similarly, our assumptions need to be 'grounded'.

Figure One

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Our construction of rationality as our ability to stand is dependent on a firm base. The firm base is the fixed place on which arguments can be 'mounted', from which questions can be 'raised', and to which explanations can be brought down. This vertical dynamic structures the language of cognitive actions: giving reasons (based on); justification (holding down); stating effects (arises from); supporting (underpinning); disagreeing (taking the ground from). These cognitive actions structure the discourse of knowledge and truth claims. Uncertainty is 'up' (things are 'up in the air', 'hang in the balance'), and certainty is 'down' ('what it comes down to is', 'rests on', 'is on firm ground').

The importance of a base in the process of reasoning is revealed also in the etymology of words such as 'hypothesis', 'supposition' and 'substance'. The Greek 'hypo' meant 'under' as did the Latin 'sub'. Having something under is therefore carried over into speculative thinking as well. Furthermore, in ancient Greece, substance (hypostasis) meant the essence of all things, that which 'underlay' all phenomena. This essentialism still has rhetorical force in the positive evaluation denoted in the noun 'substance' and the adjective 'substantial'. This is seen particularly by comparison with the pejorative associations in their opposites, for example, 'a flimsy argument' or 'clutching at straws'. This latter example reveals the double conferral of positive evaluation with 'straws' being 'insubstantial' and 'clutching' connoting the inability to 'grasp firmly. A firm grasp is only possible when there is something of substance to get hold of. Substantiality and grasping are therefore related in the rhetoric of understanding and knowledge acquisition. The word 'understanding' itself, although not usually thought of separably, reveals the metaphorical construction of 'having under' and 'standing on'. This metaphorical construction of cognitive stability has been overlooked while the emphasis in the literature on metaphor has been on the 'seeing is understanding' and 'grasping is understanding' metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sweetser, 1990; & Danesi, 1990).

Conceptual Metaphor and Conceptualising a Culture

Mapping out western academic culture in terms of its rhetorical preferences provides a conceptual approach to working in that culture. To this extent, it is pedagogically relevant to any student negotiating its conventions and genres, whether native or non-native speaker. However, for the non-native speaker, there is an additional bonus. Encouraging such students to analyse their own rhetorical value systems by comparison with those of western academic culture makes the experience of intercultural negotiation a valuable intellectual experience in its own right.

Conceptual patterns created by everyday metaphors are a good source for beginning such a contrastive analysis. Even where similar metaphorical networks exist in different languages with different cultural histories, their rhetorical effects may be stronger or weaker in varying contexts.

Western Culture and the Intercultural

Situating the rhetorical preferences of western culture in the historical-cultural context in which they have evolved, especially where the contemporary state of that culture is one of flux, both in the social and intellectual spheres, does not set them in stone, to use a metaphor of fixity from the JudaeoChristian tradition. Instead it emphasises their mobility, the possibility of change, their openness to influence from different cultural traditions. The contemporary state of flux between the deep-laid conceptual structuring of a rhetorical tradition emphasising fixity of place and the clarity of boundaries, and the 'postmodern' mode of thinking which rejects either the values attendant on that tradition in the first place, or the possibility of their continuance in a global culture where knowledge is fragmented, not tied together by any overarching 'metanarrative' (Lyotard, 1984) such as the purpose of finding absolute truth, is not dissimilar in psychological terms to the 'intercultural' world inhabited by those communicating crossculturally.

Students working in a different everyday and academic culture from their own are prototypical examples of this state, psychological and intellectual, of the intercultural, of not 'falling into place'.

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