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## **A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to the Study of the American War of Independence:**

### **A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense***

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*There is something very absurd in supposing  
a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.*

*(Thomas Paine)*

#### **Abstract**

My paper focuses on the cognitive linguistic analysis of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* written about the major war in the 18<sup>th</sup> century American history: the War of Independence. One of the crucial assumptions of Cognitive Linguistics is that language reflects the operation of human cognitive system. Thus, the reason for the appropriateness of a cognitive linguistic approach to this text is that historical works also exhibit the working of the human cognitive system: these texts are created by human minds that use their cognitive apparatus in the process of creation. In short, the study considers the role that conceptual tools, especially conceptual metaphors, play in the text. Thus, my study offers a special analysis of Paine's work, since the cognitive linguistic approach to historical texts diverges from conventional analyses which usually do not focus on linguistic aspects of such texts.

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#### **History and Conceptualization**

The human conceptual system has a significant role in the interpretation of historical events. Texts interpreting historical events are a good source for examining the workings of the conceptual system of contemporaries. The thoughts represented in such interpretative texts are not direct reflections of reality—rather, they represent various construals and perspectives taken by the interpreter.

Cognitive linguistics, and primarily conceptual metaphor analysis as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff and Turner (1989) and conceptual blending

analysis as developed by Fauconnier and Turner (1997), is helpful in studying the role of conceptual tools in historical texts, since it offers a possibility to systematically analyze thought processes through language. Indeed, one of the most important claims of cognitive linguistics is that thought is largely metaphorical and our conceptual system makes use of metaphorical processes in the act of interpretation. A further important claim is that language reflects thought, and in this way language itself is a manifestation of how people conceive of the world, and the events that happen. In this way, the study of language can help finding out about the thoughts of people and the interpretations of historical events. We can reconstruct how certain interpreters of history conceptualized specific historical events if we look at historical or literary texts of a certain period in history and carry out textual analyses within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

### *Previous Case Studies*

The cognitive linguistic analysis of texts, especially of texts of historical importance, has already been in the focus of attention in several studies. The studies conducted so far concern American history primarily (e.g. Csábi, to appear; Kövecses, 1994; Lakoff, 1992). All of the analyses mentioned below make use of cognitive linguistic notions (see e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Fauconnier & Turner, 1997) in approaching historical documents and analyzing metaphors present in such texts.

Csábi (to appear) deals with a biblical metaphor in Puritans' writings, according to which the process of the settlement of America is seen as the exodus of the Jews: the 'master metaphor' is THE SETTLEMENT OF AMERICA IS THE MOVEMENT OF THE JEWS FROM EGYPT TO ISRAEL. This metaphorical image of American history appears in numerous Puritan texts. The advantage of a cognitive linguistic analysis of Puritan historical documents is that through discovering the way Puritans wrote about America, we can make generalizations about the way they thought of and understood their world in a larger—social and cultural—context.

The conceptual metaphors that Tocqueville uses in his *Democracy of America* (1835/1987) in understanding American democracy are analyzed by Kövecses (1994). Kövecses claims that the conceptual metaphor DEMOCRACY IS A (PASSIONATE) PERSON structures Tocqueville's view of democracy. Kövecses points out that "[t]he analysis of Tocqueville's metaphors reveals that he saw American democracy as a highly defective system in which a dangerous social force needs to be controlled by other social forces" (1994:113).

George Lakoff in his 1992 article "Metaphor and war: The metaphor system used to justify war in the gulf" analyzes metaphors that were widespread during the Gulf war in American media. The most important metaphor system used in justifying the Gulf war is THE STATE IS A PERSON system, in which Hussein is the villain, Kuwait is the victim, and the U.S. is the hero. This is the "fairy tale scenario" that structures the conceptualization of the Gulf event.

Not surprisingly, American politicians in the past as well as in the present (and presumably in the future as well) use "metaphors as powerful persuasive devices because they can assume that the American public shares similar metaphorical concepts of politics" (Gibbs, 1994). Conceptual metaphors represent unconscious thought schemes, and as a result, people who use them are usually not aware of the metaphorical nature of their speech. Nevertheless, the unconsciously used metaphors manage to influence people's opinions on specific issues. This is what happened in the age of the American Revolution at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where the conceptual metaphors used by Thomas Paine in his pamphlet *Common Sense* exerted great influence on public opinion concerning the War of Independence.

### **The American War of Independence and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense***

The American War of Independence started in 1775, climaxed in 1776, and ended in 1789 with the ratification of the Constitution. The rebellion broke out as a result of the dissatisfaction of the 13 colonies in America with British rule. The dissatisfaction was primarily of economic nature, the major issue being taxation—the well-known slogan

“no taxation without representation” originated at that time. Thus, economic reasons were significant in standing up against Britain. A further significant reason to rebel against the British was the desire to have more freedom—in this sense, this revolution was the first really democratic revolution in history. The primary aim was to turn the dependent colonies into independent states and to create a republic instead of having a monarchy.

In the beginning of the Revolution, more precisely in January 1776, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* was published. This piece managed to convince a number of Paine’s countrymen to get rid of the monarchy and to replace it with a republic. More than 400,000 copies were sold altogether—which means that this was one of the “greatest best-seller America has ever seen” although Paine did not make any money out of it. He offered the returns to the Continental Congress to help funding the Revolution (Bryson, 1994:34).

As Kramnick notes in the Introduction to Paine’s pamphlet, “no single event seems to have had the catalytic effect of Paine’s *Common Sense*. It captured the imagination of the colonists as had no previous pamphlet” (1986:9). As a result of the sweeping success of Paine’s writing the revolutionary movement was gaining speed. Soon the Declaration of Independence was adopted, which definitely owes a lot to Paine’s ideas as formulated in *Common Sense*. Paine’s argument for independence and his conception of the republic appear in Thomas Jefferson’s ideas about independence in the Declaration. As Jefferson also admitted, his prose was influenced by Paine (Bryson, 1994).

As several critics of Paine’s works note, Paine did not invent completely new and original ideas concerning the American situation; rather, he summarized and communicated well-known and widespread thoughts concerning independence very successfully (cf. Foner, 1976; Bryson, 1994; Kramnick, 1986). Thus, the slogans and the new political language created by Paine spread all over America. He used a new literary style to convey his message to the readers. In fact, his style was clear and simple, though still very rhetorical, in order to reach the widest possible audience. As a professional pamphleteer, his conscious goal was to stimulate public opinion in

favor of the war, which he managed to achieve. As Paine said in 1806, “[m]y motive and object in all my political works, beginning with *Common Sense* have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government and enable him to be free” (Foner, 1976). To a large extent, he achieved this through the conceptual metaphor system that he used in his work, as described below.

### ***The Structure of Common Sense***

The pamphlet consists of three major parts: In the first part, the principles of society and government are analyzed. In the second part, the issues of hereditary rule and the validity of monarchy are taken up and are attacked. The Constitution of England is also attacked, and at the same time, the advantages of the republic are outlined. In the third part, Paine deals with American affairs, like the arguments for independence and against reconciliation. He envisions America as an independent and powerful empire with a strong government that has friendly relationships with all other nations, and he claims that certain things like having a government are natural rights of the nation.

### ***Overarching metaphors***

A short summary of the definition of conceptual metaphor as used in this paper, in harmony with the cognitive linguistic theory of metaphors: Conceptual metaphors have central roles in language and thought when concepts and expressions from one semantic area are used to think, understand and talk about others. The term *conceptual metaphor* in the cognitive linguistic view means that metaphor is defined as the process of understanding one concept, or *domain* (any coherent segment of experience) in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Kövecses, to appear). Examples of conceptual metaphors include people thinking and talking about love and life in terms of journeys, about ideas in terms of food, and many others (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses, to appear). For instance, *We're at a crossroads* is an instantiation of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY. In short, in this view, conceptual metaphor can be characterized by the following formula: CONCEPT A IS CONCEPT B (N.B. conceptual metaphors are indicated with small caps). Here, CONCEPT A is the target domain (usually an abstract domain), and CONCEPT B is the source domain (usually a concrete domain). There are systematic correspondences,

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*mappings*, between the source and the target, in which the constituent elements of the source correspond to those of the target.

Conceptual metaphors are different from metaphorical linguistic expressions, which are linguistic expressions that come from the terminology of the source concept, e.g. JOURNEY, which is used to understand another, e.g. LOVE. Thus, expressions related to love that come from the domain of journey are metaphorical linguistic expressions, and the corresponding conceptual metaphor is LOVE IS A JOURNEY.

Within a larger text, like Paine's *Common Sense*, several metaphors may occur that are related to some extent. With the help of several source domains, they may address the same target domain, like the status of America in the relationship with Britain, as in *Common Sense*. They may also be related through the same source domain that several metaphors make use of, when for instance Paine talks about Britain as well as Europe as the mother countries. Indeed, there are several metaphors appearing in Paine's work that are related and occur throughout the text. Paine uses these metaphors in his argument for separation—this is possible because conceptual metaphors play a significant role in arguments as part of his metaphorical reasoning.

Naturally, there are numerous metaphorical linguistic expressions in the text, but most of them are single instantiations of various, unrelated conceptual metaphors (e.g. *we choose you for our head*—AN ABSTRACT COMPLEX SYSTEM IS THE HUMAN BODY). These do not seem to form a coherent system in terms of the argument. Rather, they appear to be scattered around the text, and they are not strictly related to the issue of separation.

What is important for this study is whether there are any subconsciously used concepts of America, Britain, and their specific relationship that Paine made use of in his argument for separation. These are mostly 'unoriginal' and 'ready-made' ideas or rather subconscious assumptions about the state of affairs of the countries. Thus, there are metaphors forming 'systems' that govern the argument in the text. These metaphors play an important part in Paine's metaphorical reasoning about the issue of separation (cf. Lakoff, 1987, on metaphorical reasoning). Indeed, the system of

metaphors concerning separation makes Paine's argument very powerful and easily understandable. This is how it is possible that Paine writes in very clear and plain English, but at the same time he uses metaphorical language. The clearly expressed conceptual metaphors that he uses make the argument transparent for the readers, and thus make it accessible and acceptable for a wide audience.

The most significant system of metaphors consists in the relationship metaphors. A submetaphor of this system is A STATE IS A PERSON metaphor, which is a widely used metaphor even today (cf. Lakoff, 1992). Lakoff describes this generally used metaphor as follows:

A state is conceptualized as a person, engaging in social relations within a world community. Its land-mass is its home. It lives in a neighborhood, and has neighbors, friends and enemies. States are seen as having inherent dispositions: they can be peaceful and aggressive, responsible or irresponsible, industrious or lazy (1992:465).

Thus, the countries of America and of Britain are conceived of as persons having specific character traits, with certain social relationships existing between them. In general, the relationship metaphor A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATES IS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE highlights the strong bond between the countries, and suggests a perceived similarity between the relationship of states and of human beings. Some linguistic examples of this metaphor taken from Paine's work are the following: *it's time to part; separation; friendship; enemies; quarrel; reconciliation* (Paine, 1776/1986:98,99).

The relationship itself can be of several kinds; one of the most common kind that is mentioned in Paine's work is the love relationship between America and Britain. The corresponding conceptual metaphor is AMERICA AND BRITAIN ARE PARTNERS IN A LOVE RELATIONSHIP. Here, the two countries are seen as partners in a love relationship, as metaphorical word usage also proves: *affections; kindred between us and them; the relationship expires* (Paine, 1776/1986:99). Paine talks about America as the lover and Britain as the mistress as the following quote indicates:

Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence?

Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord is now broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain ... (Paine, 1776/1986:99).

A further specific instantiation of relationship metaphors is the family metaphor, in which Britain is conceptualized as the parent, usually the mother, and America as the child. A further entailment of the family metaphor is that the American colonies are conceptualized as sisters, their mother being Britain: BRITAIN IS A PARENT / A MOTHER and AMERICA IS A CHILD and THE COLONIES ARE SISTERS. The metaphors refer to a kind of family tie between the countries. The older country, the ‘creator’ of America is viewed as the parent; and the act of ‘creation’ is understood in terms of giving birth to a child. One of the main functions of a mother is that she has to look after and protect the child since there are certain dangerous things (at least from the parent’s point of view) that may cause harm to the child or imperil the child’s increasing independence and demand for freedom. Sometimes, there are ‘dangers’ that are not advantageous for the child, but are not seen as dangerous for the parent—as in the case of America and Britain: For the child (America) it is not too good to prolong dependence on the mother (Britain) because of the ambitions for independence that become more and more ‘natural’ as the child grows:

It hath lately been asserted in Parliament that the colonies have no relation to each other but through the parent country, i.e. that Pennsylvania and the Jerseys, and so on for the rest, are sister colonies by the way of England; this is certainly a very roundabout relationship, but it is the nearest and only true way of proving enmity (or enemyship)... But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct ... (Paine, 1776/1986:620).

I have heard it asserted by some, that as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty (Paine, 1776/1986:619).

In the second quote above, about prolonging or ending the connection with Britain, the main correspondences, or mappings, are the following: America is the child, Britain is the mother, and the connection (the union) with Britain is the milk, and the alternative possibility, that is, the striving after independence is seen as the meat.

An alternative way of conceptualizing the same situation also occurs in Paine's work: the mother or parent of America can not only be Britain, but also the whole continent of Europe. Thus, the metaphor AMERICA IS A CHILD can also be complemented by the metaphor EUROPE IS A PARENT/MOTHER. As this new metaphor suggests, the metaphor according to which Britain is the mother country is not quite adequate since there are a number of immigrants to America from other countries of Europe as well. The fact that Paine favors the metaphor EUROPE IS A PARENT/MOTHER in the rest of his pamphlet indicates that the importance and the demand for the separation from Britain should be seen as rightful. As a consequence, the connection to Britain is shown as a negative relation; and Paine claims Europe to be America's legitimate precedent. Thus, Britain's status and earlier significance are less esteemed in Paine's view, which can be seen through the change of metaphors, as well.

... the phrase *parent* or *mother country* hath been jesuitically adopted by the [King] and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still (Paine, 1776/1986:84-85).

... all Europeans meeting in America, or any other quarter of the globe, are *countrymen*; for England, Holland, Germany, or Sweden, when compared with the whole, stand in the same places on the larger scale, which the divisions of street, town, and county do on the smaller ones; distinctions too limited for continental minds. Not one third of the inhabitants, even of this province, are of English descent. Wherefore, I reprobate the phrase of parent or mother country applied to England only, as being false, selfish, narrow and ungenerous (ibid., 1776/1986:85).

A further elaboration of the AMERICA IS A CHILD metaphor is presented by Paine when he talks about the colonies as young persons slowly reaching mature age. Here, Paine focuses on the aging of the colonies, on the process of coming of age and becoming a mature being after a long childhood. The aging and maturing of the child naturally brings about changes in the attitudes toward the parent—this is what applies to the situation of America: It is time to change and grow up to be an independent and self-supporting nation.

Besides, the general temper of the colonies, towards a British government, will be like that of a youth, who is nearly out of his time, they will care very little about her (Paine, 1776/1986:94).

The infant state of the colonies, as it is called, so far from being against, is an argument in favor of independance. (Paine, 1776/1986:107).

As I have always considered the independancy of this continent, as an event, which sooner or later must arrive, so from the late rapid progress of the continent to maturity, the event could not be far off. (Paine, 1776/1986:91-92).

There is another conceptual metaphor related to the issue of maturity, and thus to the CHILD metaphor (at least concerning its focus): DEVELOPMENT INTO A UNION IS GROWTH OF A PLANT. Although this is not a relationship metaphor itself, it still highlights an issue that the relationship metaphor also focuses on. Here, the aspect of maturity (ripeness) is taken up and highlighted with the help of the PLANT metaphor. Examples of this are the following:

Now is the seed time of continental union, faith and honor (Paine, 1776/1986:82).

And there is no instance in which we have shewn less judgment, than in endeavoring to describe, what we call, the ripeness or fitness of the Continent for independence (Paine, 1776/1986:100).

Youth is the seed-time of good habits, as well in nations as in individuals (Paine, 1776/1986:108).

The relationship metaphors mentioned above combine with each other as well as the PLANT metaphor in the text, and they provide a clear metaphorical undercurrent underlying Paine's argument for separation. The various aspects of the relationship

between Britain and America are highlighted primarily by the metaphors about love and family relationships. A great emphasis is laid on the AMERICA IS A CHILD — AMERICAN COLONIES ARE YOUNG PERSONS metaphors. This conceptualization of the state of affairs is developed throughout the text—the argument behind is that there is a specific time in a family's life when the child has to start going his own way and has to separate from the parents in order to start his or her individual life. As Paine often stresses it, the time has come to do so—the colonies are mature enough for this act.

## Conclusion

Cognitive tools that are used in a specific period of history can be discovered through the analysis of texts of historical importance. Paine in his *Common Sense*, and many other interpreters of historical events in their works, make use of metaphorical reasoning in interpreting such events, as the cognitive linguistic analyses of documents can show it. There are cognitive tools like conceptual metaphors that Paine uses in his argument for separation from Britain. Interestingly, the conceptual metaphors that are used in the text exist independently of the events that they are used to interpret. In this way, the metaphor THE STATE IS A PERSON is not invented by Paine for the purpose of the pamphlet; rather, it is a metaphor that has been used for ages in the English language (cf. Lakoff's study of the Gulf war, 1992). The general relationship metaphor A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATES IS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE is also an extensively used metaphor that appears in several texts. Therefore, the general metaphors that Paine uses in his argument also appear elsewhere, but here they are utilized for a specific purpose, that is, to reason for the independence of America.

Further issues to be considered in subsequent analyses can be the following: What systems of conceptual metaphors appear in Paine's other works? Are they related in any sense to the system of metaphors in *Common Sense*, explicated above? Are they similar to the conceptual metaphors that other writers of the age made use of when writing about the same event, that is, of the Revolution and the issue of separation from Britain? These questions will have to be answered in a systematic way in order to get a more reliable and clearer picture of the American revolution.

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