

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 6, Metaphors and Personified Wisdom, Part 1

6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, today we're going to talk about a total revolution in how we understand the human mind, and it all starts with something you probably think is, you know, just a simple literary device – the metaphor. But what if it's not just for poets? What if metaphor is actually the hidden architecture of your thoughts, the very blueprint of your mind? So, let's start with a basic question. When you hear the word metaphor, what pops into your head? Probably something like, "All the world's a stage," right? Something you learned in high school English.

Okay, just hold onto that thought for a second. Okay, back in 1980, a linguist named George Lakoff and a philosopher, Mark Johnson, gave us this definition. Now, it sounds simple, but trust me, the implications were huge.

They would change everything. Look at those keywords – understanding and experiencing. This isn't about pretty words; it's about how we think.

It frames metaphor as a core tool our brain uses to make sense of the world. And for centuries, that's exactly how everyone saw it. Metaphor was, you know, just poetic language.

Something extra. Something novel. Maybe even a little weird compared to normal logical speech.

It was the spice, not the main course. But what if that entire view was just completely wrong? What if metaphor isn't the exception to the rule, but the rule itself? What if it's the operating system your brain uses to build all abstract thought? We're talking about everything from morality to love. Even mathematics.

Now, that is the radical idea we're diving into. So, let's break this down. First, we have to look at the traditional view.

Metaphor, more than words. For a long, long time, the consensus was clear. Metaphor was all about words, not about thought.

It was just a poetic flourish, right? A special device, totally separate from the logic of our everyday language. But then, everything changed. A revolution in cognitive science was brewing.

This was the embodied mind revolution. A whole new way of understanding, well, understanding itself. Researchers started piling up evidence that our minds aren't these abstract computers, totally separate from our bodies.

Nope. Turns out, our thinking is deeply, deeply tied to our physical experiences. And this quote from George Lakoff, man, it just perfectly captures the feeling of that moment.

He said, The ball game is over, and the mind is embodied. Just like that. The old idea of a mind as a machine? Done.

The evidence was in. The mind is embodied. So what exactly is embodied cognition? Well, it's the idea that our minds are not abstract machines.

Our thoughts, our concepts, our language, they're all shaped by the fact that we have physical bodies. Think about it. How do you understand something like up versus down or warm versus cold? You only get those concepts because you have a body that experiences gravity and temperature and space.

Our physical experiences are literally the building blocks for our most complex ideas. And this is where we circle right back to metaphor. This whole revolution is what led to Lakoff and Johnson's breakthrough book, *Metaphors We Live By*.

See, their huge insight was that these embodied concepts- up, down, in, out- are the raw material we use to build all of our abstract thoughts. It's not that we just use metaphors sometimes. We literally live by them.

They're structuring our reality from the ground up. So check this out. This really lays out the before and after.

The old view? It's all about words. Metaphor is poetic. It's special.

It's not normal. And all those everyday phrases we use, like wasting time or attacking an argument, the old view just called those dead metaphors. But the new view, it flips everything.

Now metaphor is a matter of thought. It's totally normal. It's everywhere.

It's essential. And those so-called dead metaphors, they're not dead at all. They're alive.

They are the living, breathing backbone of how we think and talk every single day. Okay, okay, so that's the theory. But what does this actually do? How does having this new superpower of understanding change how we see the world? How can this tool unlock new meaning in something, well, something really old and mysterious? Let's actually put it to the test.

To do that, we're going to look at a fascinating case study. We're diving into an ancient text, the Hebrew Bible's book of Proverbs, to meet a very mysterious figure known as Lady Wisdom. For centuries, people have been debating who or what she is.

Is she just a character? Because she sure sounds like she has divine authority. So who is this Lady Wisdom? Well, she's basically the intellectual virtue of wisdom, but personified as a woman. And she's not just a passive idea on a page.

No way. She's an active character. She's out in the city streets, speaking, teaching, warning people.

She shows up as a guide, a sister, a hostess, even a bride. And because she has all these different roles, her true identity has been this huge puzzle for centuries. This brings us to the big question.

Is she just a literary character? Is this just a fancy poetic device, you know, the old view of metaphor? Or is there something more going on here? Could the metaphor of Lady Wisdom actually be telling us something profound about the very nature of wisdom itself? All right, let's unlock this using our new theory. We're going to focus on one key phrase that comes up in Proverbs: the command to acquire wisdom. Now, on the surface, that sounds pretty simple, right? But watch what happens when we apply what we now know about metaphor.

So here's the key. In the original Hebrew, that verb, to acquire, has this really interesting double meaning. On one hand, yeah, it can mean to buy, like you're buying a commodity, but, and this is crucial, it can also mean gaining a wife by paying a bride price.

This was a really common way to start a marriage back then. In fact, you see it elsewhere in the Bible when Boaz acquires Ruth. That act establishes their husband-wife relationship.

And boom, there it is. Suddenly, acquiring wisdom isn't a transaction. It's not about buying knowledge like a product off a shelf.

The metaphor is telling you to enter into a relationship, a committed, covenantal, marriage-like relationship with wisdom. And here's where it gets even cooler. This isn't just any relationship.

The bride price isn't money. The price you pay is effort, attention, and obedience. Your goal is to court and win this powerful patroness.

And get this: in this relationship, the traditional roles are totally flipped. She's the one who protects you. She's the powerful one you have to prove yourself worthy of.

And this quote from the scholar Bruce Waltke just sums it up so perfectly. He says, Money can put food on the table but not fellowship around it, a house but not a home, and can give a woman jewelry but not the love she really wants. See, the metaphor is showing us that wisdom's real value isn't something you can buy.

It's something you have to build through relationship and commitment. Okay, so we've just gone super deep on a single phrase in an ancient book. But this isn't just about the book of Proverbs.

Not at all. This is about the hidden metaphors that are shaping your reality. Right now.

Every single day. Think about it. When you talk about politics, morality, or love, you're using metaphors.

Ever won or lost an argument? That argument is a war metaphor. Ever spent, wasted, or saved time? That's time is money. Even feeling up when you're happy or down when you're sad? That's a metaphor.

These invisible structures are everywhere. And that's really the big takeaway here. Once you realize that your mind is built to think in metaphors, you start seeing this hidden architecture everywhere.

It changes how you listen, how you read, how you think. And so, that leads us to the final question, the one for you to think about. What are the hidden metaphors that structure your world?