

Interview with Zoltán Kövecses

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GAK

Let me ponder over the question of where to start and, it seems to me, that the best point of departure is the very beginning. So, may I ask you, Prof. Kövecses, about the roots and beginnings of your fascination with language and linguistics. My own fascination with diachronic semantics started more than 30 years ago during a course in historical grammar offered by one of the – at that time – leading figures in the Polish linguistics Prof. E. Gussmann .

ZK

In my case, as in – I am sure – yours, there are several different beginnings. One started when, together with a colleague of mine, László András, we tried to put together a Hungarian-English slang dictionary in the early and mid-80s. I was fascinated by the figurative nature of slang, and I wanted to be able to say in English slang everything I could say in Hungarian slang. Another starting point happened even earlier when I was 12, that is in 1956. My father was trying to listen to the Hungarian edition of *Radio Free Europe*, but, often, because of the interference, he could only get the Voice of America in English. The words, the patches of sounds I heard made a lasting impression on me. I did not understand a single word, but the sound of the language fascinated me. Let us then say this was the phonetic beginning. :)

GAK

In my case it was my Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, which meant for me a 16-month research stay in Bayern, Germany. This determined the later profile of both my academic activity and my attitude to any such form of academic activity. Could you possibly draw a rough picture of the academic institutions, both in your home country and abroad that you either studied at or worked at? Which of these institutions made the greatest impact on your academic career?

ZK

Sure, and this is my third beginning, and the most substantial one. As I was working on the Hungarian-English slang dictionary, I noticed that the expressions related to various emotions, and especially anger, abound in figurative language both in Hungarian and English. By a lucky coincidence, in 1981 a friend of mine who lived in America sent me a little book that he thought might interest me. It was *Metaphors We Live By*. Well, it did interest me, as you can imagine. I immediately started to work on anger metaphors. And then "providence" helped me again, or, rather, pushed me to a certain direction. I received an *ACLS fellowship* (*American Council of Learned Societies*) in 1982 to go to *Berkeley* for a year to study with *Chuck Fillmore*. However, the day I showed *George Lakoff* my very early paper on anger metaphors in English sealed my fate for a lifetime, it seems. Without George, without *MWLB*, my life would have probably taken an entirely different turn. I am eternally thankful to him, as friend, mentor, and colleague.

GAK

In the early 1980', as a fledgling student of linguistic science I lived and made my initial research steps in a world dominated by the Chomskyan spirit of linguistic analysis, although the period of Chomskyan supremacy was slowly giving way to cognitive spirit of linguistic analysis. Do you think that we may expect another linguistic revolution of some sort, ? If yes, why?

ZK

My sense is that there are several revolutions happening right now. Indeed, I find it difficult to follow all the significant developments that are occurring in cognitive linguistics. We are experiencing an explosion in the study of language – mostly because we are realizing that the study of language extends way beyond the study of forms in structure. It extends to the human body (cf. the notion of “embodiment”) and the functioning of the brain, as well as the reevaluation of the role of context. We are discovering cognitive processes that have been used by speakers all the time but have not been noticed previously or have not been described in the detail and depth we can see them now. There are also major developments on the methodological front. Cognitive psychologists are doing amazing experimental work that reveal the psychological validity of many of the findings by cognitive linguists, and work in corpus linguistics is revealing enormous complexity in the data itself. I am sure these are just some of the most recent findings. It is, I believe, impossible for a single researcher even to keep track of all these developments, let alone doing high-quality work in all of them.

GAK

As you know, I myself am – what may be termed – a very much data-oriented analyst of the semantic history of words attached to broadly-understood cognitive persuasion. May I ask you two questions: What is the most important finding and the weakest point of the linguistic persuasion we share?

ZK

I simply could not identify a single finding as the most important one. All the developments I mentioned above are crucially important for an understanding of how language works, or rather, for how the human mind works when it produces and understands language. The single major weakness in all this is not really a weakness – it is a consequence of the current situation. We are still far from integrating the huge amount of knowledge from all these and other fields that could be regarded as a single coherent theory of language.

GAK

In my home country, at the University of Rzeszów we founded what has come to be known as The Rzeszów School of Diachronic Semantics (RSDS). We are truly active, and not a single semester passes that we (again) have the pleasure to send you yet another publication in the target area. Yet, we are frequently treated as museum specimens, the sad remains of the non-utilitarian, non-pragmatic, purely philological tradition of language analysis. Could you please provide some words of encouragement for my group of colleagues to go on, and keep on doing what we do?

ZK

What you and your colleagues do is absolutely essential for the cognitive linguistic enterprise, but at the same time it demonstrates the difficulty I was referring to above. In my view, and I am sure you share this view ☺, no full understanding of language is possible without a thorough and clear understanding of the diachronic aspects of language. As a matter of fact, researchers like you and others are finding that diachrony pervades synchrony and that we simply have no chance to understand language without understanding how the synchronic and diachronic aspects of language constantly merge with and influence one another. But again, there is the difficulty of explaining all this within a single coherent framework – and in harmony with the many other findings from other domains of the study of language. The challenge for your group, I think, is to attempt this integration. I know it is hard, sometimes even hopelessly difficult. However, this should not discourage anyone. This is the beauty of what we all try to do – see the whole in and through the part that we happen to be working on.

GAK

Prof. Kövecses, you have – to a substantial degree – both founded and greatly contributed to the formation of the cognitive approach to language analysis and, in this context, may I ask you why and in what respect your own theory differs from the basic cognitive models?

ZK

I wouldn't say that I have my own theory of cognitive linguistics. But I hope I can legitimately claim two things as my contribution to the field. One is that I tried to integrate various strands of cognitive linguistic research into a more or less coherent framework. This was essentially my purpose with the book *Language, Mind, and Culture*. Though this is simply a textbook, it offers an integrated view of the field at that level – not found in other works. I am proud to say that the book was translated into several languages, including, significantly, Polish. What I can perhaps take to be another sort of contribution to the field is concerned with my narrower area of research, the study of metaphor. I hope that I have enriched the theory of conceptual metaphor with some useful ideas. First of all, perhaps, with the recognition that “cognitive” or conceptual metaphors are just as much cultural as they are cognitive. This was the main message of my 2005 book: *Metaphor in Culture. Universality and Variation*, where I developed a new view of conceptual metaphors in which one can account for both the (near or potential) universality of many conceptual metaphors, as well as the amazing cultural variation one finds in conceptual metaphors. What made this possible was the development of a set of new concepts in the study of metaphor, such as the “scope of the source” the “main meaning focus of metaphor,” and the “differential experiential focus” of conceptual metaphors. I am not claiming, of course, that the cultural embeddedness of metaphors was a brand new idea; what I claim is that the cultural aspect of metaphor was relatively undertheorized in cognitive linguistics and that I attempted to redress the balance between the work on universality and that of cultural variation.

GAK

Finally, could you possibly reveal to us your current area of academic focus? What are you working on now? And when can we expect to have the benefit and the pleasure of getting to grips with the results of your current research?

ZK

In a way, I continued to work in the same direction as I explained to your previous question. It is the variability of metaphor that still fascinates me and that I find extremely challenging. In my most recent work, I am trying to reconsider the notion of context in the creation of metaphors. This work took me beyond the usual interests of cognitive linguistics, and I found myself thinking about the issue of where metaphors come from in real discourse in particular communicative situations. My answer to this question is that contexts of all kinds play a huge role here. Metaphor ceases to be a prestored conceptual structure in the mind. Many metaphors are, I suggest, “context-induced.” Again, this is not a revolutionary idea, but to really understand how metaphors work and how the metaphorical mind works, we need to reevaluate and greatly enhance the notion of context, in which context becomes an extension of the mind as traditionally viewed. The title of the new book where I discuss all this is *Where Metaphors Come From*. It was a great challenge to write it. It took over five years to really figure out what the metaphorical data found in discourse actually suggests. Hopefully, it will be published within a year.

We are looking forward to delving into its contents. Thank you very much for your time.

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