A cognitive theory of cultural meaning

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Cultural sharing has been the focus of my work over the past fifteen years. When I began this work, I was agnostic about the existence of such sharing. It is true that in my more recent collaboration with Claudia Strauss, leading up to this book, it is typically I who remind her to consider evidence for and examples of sharing and the other "centripetal" properties of culture, while she has always reminded me to include instances of nonsharing and the other "centrifugal" properties of culture in our discussion. She and I jokingly interpret this predilection as a generational one: in my training in the sixties I was primed to think about how culture was shared; trained some fifteen years later, she was primed to think about how culture was not. But by the time I began the research program to be described in these two chapters, my own early researches and perhaps the beginnings of a new climate in cultural anthropology had made me pessimistic about how shared culture might really be. I am certain of this because of one incident in my career that I have never forgotten. When I came to Duke, in the spring of 1972, to be interviewed for the faculty position I hold today, one of my interviewers was the late Weston LaBarre, the distinguished culture-and-personality theorist then on the faculty. Since I thought of myself and presented myself as a psychological anthropologist, a more contemporary label that was clearly differentiated in my mind from that of personality and culture, I was dismayed when he prefaced our interview by saying, "I see by your vita that you work in the area of personality and culture." Ever foolishly, I reacted instantly, "Oh, no, that can't be. Because I don't believe in personality," and added, "And I'm not sure I believe in culture." While this story illustrates that I might have been skeptical about finding it (or maybe, says my co-author, it just exhibits my contrary streak), I cared enough about the question of cultural sharing to spend the next many years pursuing it. That fact, certainly, reflects my membership in an earlier generation of cultural anthropologists.

I began the work reported in this chapter and the next by collecting and
examining extensive interviews from a small but varied group of US Americans on an everyday topic about which they had much to say. (Because of the awkwardness of repeating the whole phrase “US Americans” each of the many times I refer to them in this chapter and the next, I often take the liberty of dropping the “US” and simply talk about Americans and American cultural understandings. Readers should remember that I am referring to the United States.) The topic was marriage. Results of this research on Americans’ understandings about marriage appear in a series of published articles (Quinn 1982, 1987, 1991, 1992, and 1996). I will begin by briefly describing the methods I used to select interviewees and conduct interviews with them; several analyses to which the transcribed interviews have been submitted so far are described in the pages to follow.

Student research assistants and I conducted interviews in 1979 and 1980 with twenty-two individuals, the husband and wife in each of eleven marriages. Beyond some commonalities of cultural and marital experience, interviewees were selected to maximize diversity with regard to such obvious differences as their places of geographic origin, religious affiliations, ethnic and racial identities, their occupations and educational backgrounds, their neighborhoods and social networks, and the lengths of their marriages. Husband and wife in each marriage were interviewed separately, for an average of between fifteen and sixteen hours. These “intensive interviews” (for lack of a better term in social science parlance) were structured as closely as possible after ordinary conversations that one might have about one’s marriage with a friend or relative, one’s spouse, or oneself. Undoubtedly the resulting interviews are exactly like none of those, but they are enough related, and the task of being interviewed was natural enough in and of itself, so that what resulted was extensive natural-seeming discourse — indeed, an extraordinarily rich body of it.

Initially focussed on the cautious question of whether and to what extent Americans might share a cultural model of marriage, this research revealed an unexpectedly large degree of shared understanding on this topic. The obvious next question was, how did this sharing arise? Explaining the circumstances under which sharing arises should also illuminate the opposite circumstances under which understandings do not become widely shared and individual difference has more play. As will become apparent in the course of this chapter and the next, this concern with the sources and limits of sharing touches upon still other issues addressed in the last part of this book — the circumstances under which shared understandings gain motivational force and durability for individuals, and draw on preexisting thematic understandings. Another issue raised in previous chapters, that will emerge again in this one, is a methodological one: the need to study cultural sharing at the level of individual understandings in order to describe what is shared (and what is not) and to find clues to how this sharing happens, when it happens.

Following the course of a multilayered analysis of the corpus of discourse that I collected, I will describe three different kinds of sharing that, taken together, produce substantial commonalities — though, as we will see, certainly nothing like uniformity — in the way most contemporary US Americans understand marriage. The first kind is the sharing of cultural exemplars that provide speakers with the abundant metaphors in which they cast marriage in their talk about it, as they perform the routine linguistic task of clarifying, for their listeners, the points they want to make about it. Being a matter of sheer efficiency of communication, this kind of sharing is motivated largely, if not wholly, by its utility for performance of this clarification task. The second is another kind of shared task solution in the form of an internalized template people use to reason about marriage — indeed, without which they could not readily so reason. Incorporating, as it does, a cultural schema for successful realization of difficult enterprises in general that is itself widely appealing to Americans, the schema for reasoning about marriage is motivating not only by dint of its intrinsic utility for this reasoning task but also (as was already briefly noted in a discussion of Paula’s reasoning about her marital incompatibilities in chapter 5) by the force of the more general schema on which it relies. This chapter will be devoted to a consideration of these two different kinds of shared task solution. The third kind of sharing, taken up in chapter 7, is a shared constellation of powerful hopes and expectations about marriage.

While my research convinced me — and in these chapters I hope to convince readers — that culture is indeed substantially shared, it also changed my idea of what it is that is shared — about the nature of culture itself. In what was perhaps an all too monolithic view of culture, I long spoke and thought of what I was uncovering in my analysis as the cultural model (see especially, Quinn 1987 and Quinn and Holland 1987) of American marriage — as if it were the one and only such model. I now think of it as a cultural model that has arisen from specific experiences US Americans have had in common — although it is certainly one that, due to these common experiences, most of these Americans share. Even further, I have come to see the shared understanding implied in the term “cultural model” as a product of variable tendencies toward different degrees of sharedness, differentially endowed with motivating force. My imagining of the sharedness, the motivational force, and the other properties of this cultural model I owe to developing theory from cognitive science about schemas, and a recasting of these shared schemas in connectionist terms.

I should make clear at the outset what I mean by a cultural model, expanding on our brief definition, at the beginning of chapter 3, of cultural
models as complex cultural schemas. Cultural schemas may organize domains of experience of all kinds, perceptual or purely conceptual, from simple concepts of single objects or events to elaborate knowledge systems (Langacker 1986:4). Schemas like the one to be described in this chapter and the next are conceptually complex; they connect and organize an interrelated set of elements and hence not only delineate but serve as working models for entire domains of activity in the world, and for this reason have been called "cultural models" (D'Andrade 1995:151–152; Holland and Quinn 1987), a terminology I will interchange freely with "cultural schema," as called for by the context.

Rethinking cultural models in a connectionist framework not only makes clear the experiential basis of these, but also makes it possible to get closer to the processes by which such complex shared understandings are built up from shared experience. Only through studying these processes of internalization can we discover what kinds of shared experience are selected to become shared understanding. Although my research on American marriage certainly does not encompass all the kinds of shared experience from which shared understanding might arise, it does point to two major, if disparate, kinds: the shared experience of having to perform a recurrent cognitive task (the topic of this chapter), and shared experience of the emotionally intense kind exemplified by pregnant in infancy (the topic of the next chapter). My future research will continue to explore the different kinds of shared experience leading to shared cultural models. This research question simply does not arise within a paradigm confined to study of the externalities of experience—of public culture alone.

In most of my research so far, as exemplified in this chapter and the next, the strategy has been to exploit clues in ordinary discourse for what they tell about shared cognition—to glean what people must have in mind in order to say the things they do. This strategy depends at once on extensive analysis of patterns in certain linguistic usages that recur in discourse, and close analysis of the details of this use. Metaphor use, reasoning, and the use of key words, as exemplified in these two chapters, have proven to be especially fruitful linguistic features of discourse because they occur relatively frequently in ordinary talk, and because each, for a different reason that will become apparent, bears a heavy load of cultural knowledge.

**Analysis 1. Metaphors for marriage and what they do**

An analysis of the metaphors people used in their talk about marriage, prompted by the influential and provocative work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), provided me with some of my first clues to Americans' understandings of marriage. This examination of metaphors for marriage also led me, ultimately, to rethink the role that linguists have granted to culturally shared metaphor (Quinn 1991, n.d.). I have arrived at a wholly different interpretation from that of Lakoff and his colleagues, for the phenomenon to which they must be credited with drawing our attention—that is, the ubiquity of metaphors in ordinary human speech. My explanation rests on the repeated necessity of clarifying the point we are trying to make to others as we convey our ideas to them in speech. As will emerge later in this part of the chapter, speakers' deliberate use of metaphor to clarify their points is not the only source of metaphor in ordinary speech. It is, however, a very productive source, and the metaphors so chosen are not only common but, just because they have a point to make, especially noticeable. The metaphors speakers use to talk about marriage are of this type.

Here I will present evidence for my view that speakers employ these and other metaphors to clarify their points. Using a connectionist framework, I will then indicate how metaphors do this clarification work and describe how cultural knowledge of apt metaphors for doing so becomes shared. Finally, I will offer a critique of the prevailing theoretical and methodological approach, derived from linguistics, to the study of metaphor. This is an approach, I will argue, that underestimates the variability in the use of metaphors while overstating their role in constructing understanding. My critique parallels our earlier one, in this book, of the pursuit of cultural meaning through the exclusive study of public culture. By taking culture seriously as an integral part of cognition, and applying the theory of culture developed in this book to my findings regarding metaphors for marriage, I arrive at a fresh account of a phenomenon—metaphor use—that has been the topic of long investigation and continued controversy in several cognitive sciences.

A great advantage of my view of metaphor is that it suggests an answer to the question of how metaphors like those Americans use for marriage come to be so widely shared. It will emerge that metaphors like these derive their sharedness from two sources. First, they draw upon cultural exemplars of those aspects of experience that the speaker wishes to clarify for the listener. Secondly, these metaphors fall into classes reflecting a shared set of underlying concepts that the metaphors have been chosen to represent and highlight. Why this set of concepts should, in turn, be shared will be addressed in the second half of this chapter. Here I will direct my attention to the metaphors themselves, presenting evidence, first, of the classes into which metaphors fall and the underlying concepts that these classes reflect.
Shared classes of metaphor

Strikingly, the hundreds of metaphors for marriage found in my corpus of discourse fall into just eight classes. These are: (1) metaphors of *lastingness*, such as, "It was stuck together pretty good" or "It's that feeling of confidence about each other that's going to keep us going"; (2) metaphors of *sharedness*, such as, "I felt like a marriage was just a partnership" or "We're together in this"; (3) metaphors of *mutual benefit*, such as, "That was really something that we got out of marriage" or "Our marriage is a very good thing for both of us"; (4) metaphors of *compatibility*, such as, "The best thing about Bill is that he fits me so well" or "Both of our weaknesses were such that the other person could fill in"; (5) metaphors of *difficulty*, such as, "That was one of the hard barriers to get over" or "The first year we were married was really a trial"; (6) metaphors of *effort*, such as, "She works harder at our marriage than I do" or "We had to fight our way back almost to the beginning"; (7) metaphors of *success or failure*, such as, "We knew that it was working" or, conversely, "The marriage was doomed"; and (8) metaphors of *risk*, such as, "that so many odds against marriage" or "The marriage was in trouble." 

This discovery, of the recurrent use of a small number of metaphor classes to describe a domain of American life, across discourse on this topic by a diverse group of Americans, was my first evidence of widely shared understandings about marriage. This regularity had to be discerned beneath a great deal of diversity in the way in which couples and individuals within these dyads represented, spoke about, and thought of their marriages. Some interviewees obviously relished their metaphors and produced novel and elaborate ones, while others were minimalist in this regard. Most liked to talk about their marriages; a few did not, or shied away from disclosure on certain marital topics. Different interviewees made something a little different of the interview itself, one couple seeing it as an opportunity to present their visionary model of marriage to the world, another treating it as a chance to explore their own role as pioneers in what they saw as a different kind of marriage, another to reaffirm what they found good about their marriage, one man to relate the history of his, and other individuals to therapize about their marriages or tell their side of things to a neutral person. Different couples and individuals dwelt on different aspects of their marriages, providing more discussion of and metaphors for some concepts than for others. One wife, for example, spoke long and eloquently, in a variety of extended metaphors, about the difficulties that had been overcome in her marriage. Some – for example, the man who maintained a running metaphor for the benefits of marriage as liquid in a container, the level of which could rise or fall and be measured by a mechanical gauge – returned repeatedly to one or another pet metaphor (to use a metaphor). They had different theories about marriage, and different marital issues, and different styles of married life, of which they were also in different stages. Some were in happier, others in distinctly less happy marriages at the time they were interviewed, and some subsequently divorced. For all of these reasons, and others, interviewees had diverse stories to tell about their marriages. The common set of concepts – lastingness, sharedness, mutual benefit, and so forth – that all these stories embellish is therefore all the more arresting.

Having given just two examples to illustrate each class of metaphor, I will reinforce my point about the variety of these metaphors for marriage within the classes to which they belong with a single more extended example – that of marital *lastingness*. Speakers frequently cast its lastingness in the metaphor of marriage as a manufactured product: one that is well-made in the senses of being not only well put together – "stuck together pretty good," in my earlier example – but also structurally sound – for instance, "They had a basic solid foundation in their marriages that could be shaped into something good"; one that is made out of strong materials – e.g., "We forged a lifetime proposition"; and good parts – e.g., "We have looked into the other person and found their best parts and used those parts to make the relationship gel"; and one that is made with the necessary care – e.g., "When the marriage was strong, it was very strong because it was made as we went along; it was sort of a do-it-yourself project"; and effort – e.g., "Maybe that had something to do with what was good about it. The fact that we really had to work at it." However, this is far from the only metaphor that these speakers used to convey the expectation of marital lastingness. Another very common metaphor for a lasting marriage is that of an ongoing journey that married people undertake together – "That's going to keep us going," in the other earlier example of marital lastingness. Somewhat less frequently but no less predictably, speakers use other metaphors of marriage as two inseparable objects – "We knew we were going to stay together"; as a durable attachment between spouses – "That just kind of cements the bond"; as a permanent location – "I was able to stay in the marriage"; as a secure possession – "We got it"; and as an indestructible natural object – "the everlasting Gibraltar nature of the whole thing" – among other metaphors – to convey the expectation of its lastingness.

At the same time that the small number of metaphor classes suggests widespread sharing, the finding of such variability among the metaphors within these classes suggests that the metaphors themselves cannot be the basis of this shared understanding. This conclusion runs counter to arguments made by Lakoff and his colleagues (Johnson 1987; Lakoff and
Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Koveces 1987) to which I have already alluded. These researchers imagine that the metaphors they encounter in spoken and written language reflect deeper conceptual metaphors that “allow” or “constitute” conceptualization, comprehension, and understanding. However, the many different metaphors that speakers readily call upon to recast the same underlying concept is evidence against a constitutive role for metaphor. Instead, as I have elsewhere argued (Quinn 1991), in their pattern of usage these metaphors for marriage reflect an underlying schema that people share for thinking about marriage, and that guides their selection of metaphors for it. This schema will be the focus of the second half of this chapter, on reasoning about marriage.

In assuming that what is in mind is so directly manifest in language, students of metaphor like Lakoff are reminiscent of anthropologists such as Geertz, discussed in chapter 2 (on this point about Geertz in particular, see Wikan 1987) and literary critics such as Fredric Jameson, to be discussed by Claudia Strauss in chapter 8, who assume that what is in people’s minds can be read directly from public culture. Perhaps it should not surprise us that a theory placing such inferential weight on linguistic forms should have originated with linguists. And perhaps it is only because anthropologists lack any more developed theory of cultural meaning of their own, that they have so quickly and uncritically incorporated into their own formulations Lakoff’s assumption that metaphor “structures” or provides the “model for” the understanding that it captures. Although language holds the clues to the cultural schema I will describe, the schema is far from isomorphic with the language, or obvious from it; certainly, it is not retrievable from any given metaphor speakers use. As I will return to at the end of my analysis of metaphor, reconstruction of such cultural schemas from the indirect clues provided by language requires a suitably sensitive method.

**Cultural exemplars as sources of metaphors**

This conclusion, that our knowledge of the domains about which people are speaking guides their selection of metaphors to describe these domains and reason about them, points to an explanation for what metaphors are used to do. Metaphors, I have already suggested, clarify. One important reason they are used, and used so very frequently in everyday speech, is that they do a good job of clarifying for listeners the nonmetaphorical points speakers are trying to get across. And for this same reason – along with their high rate of use for this purpose in ordinary discourse – they are excellent clues to the cultural schemas that underlie them.

This brings us to the second source of sharing that gives metaphor use its regularity. Not only are metaphors selected to exemplify shared concepts; as I will next explain, they are drawn from shared exemplars of these concepts. In this way they introduce an outstanding and unambiguous instance of the point being made. The degree to which these cultural exemplars are shared by speakers is no less striking than the sharing of the underlying concepts that guide metaphor selection and account for the classes of metaphor speakers use. Indeed, metaphors clarify precisely because they are drawn from domains that are widely acknowledged exemplars, with regard to whatever aspects of experience they are being made to stand for. Because speaker and listener intersubjectively share an exemplar, both knowing what it exemplifies, the chosen metaphor does the job of clarifying the point for the listener. Members of a speech community must share these exemplars in order to be able to use them to communicate in this way.

To see how metaphors drawn from exemplars work, consider an illustration I culled from the sports page of USA Today (May 5, 1993). Third baseman George Brett, interviewed on the occasion of his retirement from baseball, comments on his unusually long-term relationship with the Kansas City Royals: “I compare it to a marriage. We’ve had our problems, but overall, we have had a good relationship. I never, ever want to put on another uniform.” Marriage is famous among Americans for being something that is meant to endure and that does so (when it does so) in spite of its difficulties. That is why George Brett’s metaphor gives us all a surer sense of what he wants to convey about his relationship with the Royals.

As with Brett’s choice of the marriage metaphor, speakers’ selection of a metaphorical source domain often seems motivated precisely by the point they have in mind. The case of the husband who speaks of his marriage in terms of “the everlasting Gibraltar nature of the whole thing,” is illuminating in this respect. The context for this metaphor is his remembering the moment in his marriage when he realized “that my confidence in the everlasting Gibraltar nature of the whole thing was rather naïve” [SH-4]. To underscore how, in his naiveté, he overestimated the lastingness of marriage, this speaker employs a metaphor of something truly lasting – indeed, an icon of the everlasting for many US Americans, appropriated, reproduced, and widely disseminated as the logo of a national insurance company. A parallel example comes from another interviewee: expressing his surprise about a marriage of acquaintances that “suddenly broke up,” he says, “We had no warning; if ever a marriage was nailed in cement, that was the one” [SH-2]. Both these men draw metaphorically on things known for being exceptionally lasting to emphasize how unquestioning, indeed unrealistically so, were their initial expectations about the lastingness of given marriages. On the other hand, for the points about actual
marriages that speakers ordinarily want to make, the Rock of Gibraltar and cement may be entirely too durable. Handier metaphorical source domains are manufactured products that, while they might be made to last, can indeed "break," and that are known to break as frequently as they last; other kinds of things that, even though of a type that usually lasts, can conceivably be flawed or—like the marriage described by one interviewee that "just blew apart like someone put dynamite under it" [6W-6]—destroyed by external forces; possessions that can be "up for grabs," or "slide right down the tubes," as well as being securely held or safely kept; or travels that sometimes end in mid-journey, rather than reaching their planned destinations. All these are supposed to last, even though people recognize that they do not always do so: Americans believe that manufactured things should be well made; possessions are often treated as inalienable in their society, like people everywhere, they expect hard materials to resist erosion and rough treatment; and they set out on their travels fully intending to reach their destinations—even though these outcomes, like a lasting marriage, do not always eventuate. Manufactured products, durable things, possessions and journeys are drawn upon over and over again as sources of metaphors for lasting marriages, not because they constitute our understanding of marriage, but simply because they are the major cultural exemplars, in our world, of things that typically last.

By contrast, there are metaphors that seem distinctly wrong when we try them out as characterizations of marriage. Here is one case. At a Catholic wedding ceremony described to me, the officiating priest counseled the couple about to be wed that they should think of marriage as an ice cream cone. You can eat it up fast, the priest explained, or you can lick it slowly and make it last a long time. The wedding guest who told me this story reported that members of the wedding party squirmed during that part of the ceremony, and complained vociferously among themselves afterwards about the priest's disconcerting comparison. This metaphor has an obvious sexual connotation that might explain some of the guests' discomfort. But I think any reader would also agree, the metaphor simply does not fit. It is experienced as inappropriate, I would argue, because food is nondurable, and ice cream is a particularly perishable food: no matter how slowly you eat an ice cream cone, you can only make it last so long. Among all the hundreds of metaphors for marriage that occurred in the discourse of my interviewees, not one likened it to any kind of food.

Sometimes speakers wish a metaphor to exemplify, more than a feature of marriage in isolation, a relation between its features—as Brett uses the analogy to marriage to capture the relation between the lastingness, the difficulty, and the satisfaction of his association with the Royals. Some metaphors are favored, and hence recur with frequency, because they do such a good job of capturing these complexities of experience. Thus one reason well-made products are such popular metaphors for marriage is because they are intended not only to last but to work (and can not only break, as I have noted, but can also break down). The prototypical manufactured product is one made to perform some function. When Americans speak about a machine or other manufactured product that "works" they mean that it does what it was made to do, performs this job successfully, and doesn't break down in the process. Indeed, a fixture on the American scene is Consumer Reports, a nationally distributed, widely subscribed magazine devoted to testing and rating products for their performance and durability. Marriages should also last and "work" in the sense of succeeding. Thus, one woman describes herself and her husband at the wedding of friends, looking at each other and shaking their heads, saying, "It'll never work. It'll never work." [1W-5]. (They turned out to be right.) Conversely, a man says, "We wanted the marriage to keep working." [3H-1]. In a much more elaborate and much more specific metaphor of something that performs its function well because it was made well, another husband explains "The self-righting concept that the marriage has enough soundness and equilibrium that it will take steps to right itself in any kind of stormy situation" [7H-6].

For Americans, manufactured products stand as the prime exemplars of things that not only last and work, but are built to do so in part because of the effort put into them. Chief among the ingredients that go into a well-made, properly-working product, most people understand that effort is also central to a lasting, successful marriage. Thus, the man who says, "We wanted the marriage to keep working," continues, "so we made the effort to communicate and talk things out, to change our routines." This effort may be that of manufacturing something durable, like a seaworthy vessel. It may also be conceptualized as the effort of keeping something well maintained, as another interviewee conveys, with the example of a different kind of manufactured product: "If you get a new house and just let it sit for year after year without doing anything to it, it's going to deteriorate and I feel that a marriage is something that you have to continue to work at it" [11W-16]. Favorited, too, is a metaphor in which effort is the work that goes into making something function as it should, because it captures the relation between the effort put into marriage and marital success—and perhaps also because it conveys the kind of effort of adjustment that, as will be seen in the next section, ordinarily goes into achieving marital compatibility. In the words of still another interviewee, "This is more permanent, this is something that you should make work, you know. And not anything that you should give up on. You know, you should always keep trying no matter what" [2W-1].
Journeys, as already noted, are another popular metaphor for marriage. They can be of long duration, continuing until arriving at some desired destination, "a place" that stands for a happy marriage. They typically also involve encounters with obstacles—like the "stormy weather" of the metaphor already cited, that the ship has been built to ride out on its voyage. These obstacles often require effort to surmount. Thus, as a metaphor for marriage, the journey can be made to express the need to overcome marital difficulties with effort, to attain benefit, and to last, as in "It was worthwhile enough to struggle through those periods and move on" [5W-1], or, "However long and stony a road it was we had agreed to set out on it and meet each small situation as it came" [4H-7]. Journeys are often also undertaken with travelling companions. Thus they work as a metaphor for the relation between sharedness and lastingness, as in such comments as this one, in which the companions go their separate ways in mid-journey: "If it gets static in our relationship then that's when we split I guess, or start going a different direction" [3W-5]. Of course, the same points can readily be made in different metaphors, or nonmetaphorically, as speakers elsewhere illustrate. The journey is a favored one, I argue, because it is a cultural exemplar of a protracted activity having an ultimate objective, predictably beset with difficulties that require effort to overcome, and that can be undertaken with another person—a cluster of features that also characterize marriage.