Metaphors we live by: Some examples from Donegal Irish

Keith Basso (1990: xii), in discussing the value of anthropological linguistics for the ethnographer, proposes that:

it proceeds on the premise that ethnographic fieldwork is centered on discerning the meanings of local symbolic forms, that language is everywhere a symbolic form without parallel or peer and that the activity of speaking—of enacting and implementing language—is surely among the most meaning-filled of all. On such a view, language emerges as a powerful vehicle of thought and a crucial instrument for accomplishing social interaction, as an indispensable means of knowing the world and for performing deeds within it.

This paper discusses some of the results of recent fieldwork in discovering the meaning of some of Donegal’s local symbolic forms as enacted and implemented in the Irish language. The consultants who provided the information are all from Donegal, from Tory Island and from Rannafast specifically, but I believe their testimony has a wider application than in those localities alone. My evidence will support an idea that linguistic metaphors are important in the way that human beings understand the physical environment, my title is borrowed from a well known work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who contend that (1980: 146):
Since much of our social reality is understood in metaphorical terms, and since our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical, metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us.

Their view opposes the objectivist viewpoint that metaphor can, at best, only describe reality, upon which lived human experience has no bearing. The authors discuss a large amount of data in putting forward their argument, and seem to me to make a convincing case. In another work, Lakoff and Turner (1989) propose that metaphors in everyday language are not dead, as has been suggested, by virtue of the fact that speakers are not fully conscious of them. On the contrary, they hold that those metaphors which are “most alive and most deeply entrenched, efficient and powerful are those that are so automatic as to be unconscious and effortless” (129). What is most valuable about this view of metaphor, is that it treats everyday spoken language as a coherent metaphorical system, as Basso advocates. This paper will examine a complex of such concepts and their importance for understanding the world view of native Gaelic speakers, primarily in a contemporary context. I will, however, also offer some diachronic comparisons in order to suggest that these concepts are of considerable antiquity and importance. Although, these are terms which, in themselves, are not ostensibly metaphorical, my argument will propose that metaphorical assumptions underpin their semantic interpretation. Finally, I will discuss Kerby A. Miller’s reading of the Gaelic Catholic worldview (1985), in light of my evidence, suggesting that a certain imbalance exists in his interpretation of it, and attempting to redress it to some extent.

In researching the poetics of entertainment of Tory Island over a number of years, with a particular focus on song, I became aware of two seemingly opposing phrases which cropped up regularly enough in people’s conversations. One was the way in which one of my consultants described the schoolhouse dance particularly when things were not going to well at it. The aim of the dance was to provide an oíche mhór, a big night, for all the participants, that is, a night which would be discussed for days afterwards because of its sterling performances of music, group
and single dances and songs (Ó Laoire, 1999). On big nights such as this, certain events permanently enter the island’s repertoire of stories, because of the witty or humorous nature of what someone had said or done. This depended on all playing their parts with skill and precision in order to reach the high point. This was known as keeping the night “up”. However, if the night did not go well, events were said to be going down—both “up” and “down” being orientational metaphors, also common in English (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 14-21). Such events were said to be *fuar* “cold”, something which was usually directly related to the absence of the elders. During these dances, the elders stayed until the part of the night when all the songs had been sung, upon which they usually rose as a body and went home. After their departure the schoolhouse was described as cold, and the best part of the night was deemed to have been over at that point. I believe that such coldness was first and foremost a physical feeling, but that it was also an expression of a dissatisfaction with the elders’ absence, an emotional coldness rising out of the physical feeling. A direct correlation can therefore be observed between the orientational metaphor of downward motion, and of physical and, by extension, emotional coldness.

On the other hand, a big night would not have been cold, although I have not heard anyone specifically referring to a big night in terms of being warm or hot.

One night however, when I was acting as an MC for an event which finished at 2 in the morning, a young woman remarked to me that the night was over far too soon, adding *níl mise ach ag téamh*, “I am only warming up.” I understood from this that she meant more than the fact that she had not physically become sufficiently warm. She was, in fact, referring to the emotional temperature of the night, stating that the night had not reached its high point and that it should have continued until it did. It is important to note here that this event occurred on the mainland, in Gortahork. Because of Irish licensing laws, the event had to end at 2.00 a.m. Had it been held on Tory itself, the event would certainly have continued for several hours more.

The phrase *te dá chéile*, is however, common in Tory and elsewhere in
Donegal to describe proper social relations between individuals (Ó Colm: 1995 [1971], 14). I have heard a woman say, Níl na daoine chomh te dá chéile agus a bhí siad, “The people are not as warm to one another as they were,” implying that there was a greater distance between the islanders nowadays, that they were not as close as formerly. This phrase has been interpreted by my consultant from Rannafast, John Ó Duibeannaigh as follows:

J. The word *teas* has many contexts. “They are warm people”.
L. What is meant by that, John?
M. Those are people who are very loyal (díoghraiseach) to one another . . . anyone who is at all related to them, it would upset them to the core, if anything went wrong with them, . . . there are extended families of people who are warmer, whose blood is warmer, now the blood is what is meant, do you understand? “They are warm people . . . O they are very warm towards one another.” They are very . . . not friendly to one another. You can be very friendly with someone but you are not that warm towards each other. Like your own progeny would be, now, the care and responsibility (cúram) you have towards your own family, you know, perhaps towards your great grandchildren—and that’s going out—and we say then, “they are a group of warm people”.

Clearly, John Ó Duibheannaigh explains this kind of metaphorical heat in terms of blood relationship, using the adjective *díoghraiseach*, “loyal”, and the noun *cúram*, “care or responsibility” to explain its semantic range, and also the descent term *fionnóí*, great grandchildren, to show its generational extent. Friendliness, *bheith mór le duine*, is clearly not what is meant by this term, but the reciprocal loyalty and responsibility felt by a kinship group towards one another. He also mentioned that this word was covered by the term “clannish” in English, also commenting that a borrowing from this *clannisháilte*, was becoming more common among contemporary Irish speakers of his acquaintance.

The anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1995, 35) comments on the strengths of kinship bonds among humans:

The cooperation of kin is still the surest form of cooperation among human beings, as among all creatures. . . . community can
also create the assurance of cooperation. In a small community, everyone will still be there tomorrow, so that people cooperate rather than risk social ostracism. No matter how much they may hate one another, they will cooperate in most matters because the rewards of cooperation are greater than the reward of non cooperation minus the punishment of non cooperation.

Bohannan’s analysis, pragmatically expressed as it is, accords well with John Ó Duibheannaigh’s interpretation, although it seems to me that John’s carries more emotional and implied ethical overtones, and consequently, that it emphasizes the responsibility of blood relatives toward each other and particularly of older to younger group members. Of course, the importance of kinship has been well documented for rural Ireland by various studies over the years (e.g. Aremsgber and Kimball, Scheper Hughes, Hannan, Fox.)

In the same way as John has commented that the teas of kinship extends as far as great grandchildren, Fox reveals that the Tory genealogists told him that the relationship was fuar “cold” when it went out further than that, that is when people no longer remembered the exact degree of their kinship bonds, but that they simply knew vaguely that they existed. Consequently, then, it is clear that there is a strong link between these metaphorical concepts of heat and cold and the social structure which prevailed in rural Ireland in the past. Tory’s genealogies and their significance for social interaction have been documented in detail in Fox’s work (1995 [1978], 31–81).

A diachronic comparison reveals that similar concepts were enshrined in the Gaelic legal system in former times, and that the term mac húar, “a cold son”, (DIL: 1990, 622, 29) denoted a son who was no longer entitled to his father’s protection. Conversely, the term gor “warm” (DIL: 1990, 368, 136–137) is similarly used to indicate a son who was in good standing with his father and who correctly performed his duties towards him. The term gor is not the same as te of course, but they cover similar semantic ranges. Although the term gor survives in the spoken language in Donegal in various phrases, it is not used in this way specifically. In the historical legal and in the modern contemporary contexts, however, both
signifiers concur in representing what John Ó Duibheannaigh has called the *díograis* and the *cúram* of kinship bonds. A further usage is found in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (Ó Tuama, 1963, 36), where Eibhlin exhorts her husband to arise from the dead in the following lines:

And rise up Art,
And come home with me...
Until I dress your bed,
With white sheets
With fine speckled quilts
Which will make you sweat
Instead of the cold which has overcome you.

These lines exhibit a stark contrast between life and death, and they also, I believe, strongly imply an erotic dimension to the metaphorical concept of heat. I consider then, that this demonstrates that the concepts of heat and cold are in a continuum which covers a wide range of emotions, which can be contextualized in different ways. Accordingly, such concepts are of considerable antiquity, and are relevant for understanding the ways in which emotion is expressed through the medium of language. They are metaphors which arise out of embodied human experience, and which are built upon to express concepts as far apart as enmity or the strength of kinship bonds recognized by communities such as Tory. Moreover, it is no exaggeration to consider them to be basic metaphors for life and death, something which can be implicitly understood from the lines from *The Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire*.

Two other terms used to express different emotions are important in this regard, it seems to me, namely, those of *cumha* or *cumhaidh* “grief, longing, pining” as it is expressed in Donegal Irish and *uaigneas* “the want of company, solitude, fear of the supernatural”. These different terms signify emotions which in some ways are very similar, but which are strikingly different in others. Although they seem to have no specifically overt connection to those of *te* and *fuar*, already discussed, it will be part of my argument here to establish such a connection.

In the same way as my attention was drawn to the terms *te* and *fuar* by an inkling that they were important to the poetics of entertainment in
Tory, *cumha* and *uaigneas* also became significant in this respect. The term is used adjectivally in Donegal Irish also, and came to my notice originally when applied to songs. *Tá na seanamhráin Ghaeilge cumhaidhiúil*, “the old Irish songs inspire a longing, sorrowful feeling” is a phrase sometimes used by those who sing them, to describe the feelings of sadness which they elicit. However, the never say that the songs are *uaigneach*, a term which seems to have a close semantic correlation to feelings of sorrow. This apparent closeness intrigued me to investigate further. I questioned John Ó Dubhheannaigh about this also and he confirmed what I had thought, that although they describe quite different conditions, they are at the same time closely connected in some respects. According to my interpretation of John’s testimony, when the adjective *uaigneach* is used attributively, i.e., *di uaigneach atá ann*, “it is a lonely place”, it signifies something different to its use in a predicative context, i.e., *bhi an dítt uaigneach aréir* “the place was lonely last night”. Attributive usage in this example, seems to be to carry the meaning of supernatural eerieness, where the predicative usage, signifying lacking in lively company, is the closest to the situation I was trying to describe regarding the dance situation in Tory, and like heat which is an integral part of a successful dance in Tory, that this term corresponds to the *fuacht* or the “cold” felt when the dance was not going so well. John explained the term as follows:

J. There was. “There weren’t many people there. Oh, indeed, it was a lonely (uaigneach) night.” You could say that. Anywhere there is no camaraderie or company or where everyone is in fits of laughing . . .

L: Are there any other words you could use in that way, where a crowd was expected but didn’t come, that the place looked kind of empty?

J. Well, there are many ways that they say it. They say, “I was at the dance last night,” if it’s the kind of dance we are talking about, perhaps with not many present or anything like that, “and it was like a wake house. It was . . . there wasn’t a peep (smid) in the house, . . .” but I don’t know if you could say completely that there was loneliness (*uaigneas*) on you there.

L. Well, that not what I meant. Could you say that the house looked
cold?

J. Oh, you could, you could, you could. You could say “oh indeed, it was a cold half empty house, or a cold empty house, if there was only a handful of people there. O a cold house, coldness certainly comes in there, and very strongly. A cold house, and . . . “they rose to dance and they did a cold little set (cúrsa beag fuar) . . . They did a cold set. There were only a few on the floor, and since there weren’t more, it wasn’t with any croí “heart” or aigneadh “spirit” that they were there, but because it was supposed to be a night’s dancing, and they did a cold little set on the floor.

In this excerpt, John again clearly distinguishes between uaigneas bheith ort, literally, “to have uaigneas upon you” the substantive use and the adjectival one. In short, the two structures express different ideas. It can be also be seen that there is some connection between fuacht and uaigneach, although it is not specifically spelt out, and that the term can be applied to a half-hearted poorly attended dance, which resonates particularly well with the Tory case. In this case, I think it comes quite close to providing an answer for the islanders dislike of fuacht at their dances, since John links it directly to an half empty hall. I do not believe that this link is a tenuous one, although speakers often do not recognize these connections directly, like many other linguistic metaphors. I propose then, that the term uaigneach, in its predicative sense is directly linked to this cold feeling, although of course, the term has a much wider semantic application than that. John again explains:

you feel uaigneas when you have no company to keep you chatting and conversing. You often feel uaigneas, many people do anyway, out at night, for fear that someone who had died would appear and that you would meet him, that’s now people who had died, and there is uaigneas because people aren’t coming to visit you . . . If you want to compose poetry or to do something like that, you are looking for uaigneas, you’ll go to uaigneach places, you’ll go to the place where there is quiet (suaimhneas) where there will be no one to bother you in the least, for if you get company at that time, you are getting it at the wrong time, and of course, we have a
proverb, that good *uaigneas* is better than bad company, and it seems to me to be a very true saying.

John discerns three different meanings for *uaigneas* in the above extract
(a) someone wanting in company feels *uaigneas* (b) the fear of otherworld spirits and (c ) the peace and quiet necessary to perform mental activities. As I have said, my focus here is primarily on (a) the first of the three.

John had a very different starting point for his interpretation of *cumha*:

People feel *cumha* once they reach the age of sense, and, to tell the truth, the baby feels *cumha* from the moment it is born. If his mother only goes around the house, he is crying looking for his mother. He doesn’t care who else he has, he is pining after his mother. But that *cumha* continues all the way down.

John’s interpretation focuses on one of life’s most central relationships, that of mother and child, indicating that the pining feeling of a child for its absent mother continues throughout life. I believe that John is referring to the human condition here, and that *cumha* is a native term for this condition. In this case, it is interesting to note that Micí Mac Gabhann (1996, 36), in a particularly poignant description of *cumha*, states that there is no greater occasion for *crá croí*, than the separation of mother and son.

Teresa McClafferty of Tory distinguished clearly between *uaigneas* and *cumha*, giving fear of the otherworld as the primary meaning of *uaigneas*. Both she and John independently mentioned the difference between *cumha an duine mhairbh*, pining after the dead and *cumha an duine beo*, pining after the living, concurring that the latter was by far the most intense feeling, which increases with time, while the former ebbs with the passing years. Teresa expressed this ebbing of feeling with the verb *fuaraigh* “to cool”, which is again significant, I believe. While Teresa specifically mentioned the hypothetical example of a couple who had broken up after a long relationship, John chose to focus upon the situation of emigration, and particularly of emigration to America, which in his youth in the 1920s and 30s, was considered almost to have the finality of
death.

... I believe then, that the concepts te and fuar and cumha and uaigneas can be interpreted as having a reasonably systematic relationship to one another. Of course, I say “reasonable”, because this is a structural interpretation on my part, which the speakers themselves are not specifically aware of, and which for that reason, cannot be too rigidly applied.

Unlike then, being fuar, uaigneach, and wanting the company of others, the term cumha has strong intimations of the teas, the heat of human association and relationships. Furthermore, it is no exaggeration to say that this heat is one of the fundamental aims of dances in Tory, which when achieved, transforms the progression of events into a memorable occasion for all participants to be savoured and recalled in the future. It can also be seen that cumha is an important element of the human condition, perceptively imagined in terms of a child’s desire to be united with its mother. A full analysis of this image falls outside the concerns of this paper, but As I have discussed elsewhere (Ó Laoire:1999), I believe that this conception underpins the legend of Leac na Cumháí near Churchill in Donegal, said by Mánuś Ó Dónaill to have been simply blessed by Colm Cille, but believed by Micí Mac Gabhann (1996, 42–44) in his vivid account to be the actual flagstone upon which Colm Cille was born. Colm Cille, of course, was the earliest and most famous of Irish exiles and was often invoked by later emigrants (Mac Gabhann 1996, 66). We have already seen images of heat and cold in Caoineadh Airt Úi Laoghaire where the term cumha is also used:

My love you are and my intention
Your stacks are standing
Your tawny cows are a-milking
And it is my heart that is beset by grief (cumha)
which Munster could not cure
Or the smiths of oileán na bhFionn
Until Art Ó Laoghaire shall come
My grief (cumha) will not be spent
Which is pressed in the centre of my heart
Shut up tightly
Like a locked trunk
For which the key is missing.

Rachel Bromwich (1945) has commented on these lines, remarking on the vividness of the lost key image and comparing it to similar images in Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh’s lament poetry. Although Breandán Ó Buachalla (1999) has recently rejected the image of Eibhlín as a keening woman. Nevertheless, whether purely literary or not, the image of unrelenting grief here is a strong one, shedding further light on the interpretive possibilities of the term *cumha*.

The concept of *cumha* in modern Donegal can be seen to be inscribed in the local landscape through the character of Colm Cille and constitutes part of the world view of its people, what Bourdieu (1977) calls the *habitus*, a complex of assumptions and perceptions that are so commonplace as to appear natural, establishing a strong connection between the term and “really inhabited space”, which is what the term “home” constitutes according to Bachelard.

Henry Glassie’s taxonomy of the levels of entertainment in Ballymenone (1982, 37) places music and song at the top, and it is interesting to note that the terms “heartsome” and “lonesome” are used there (472), and that they comprise similar meanings to those I have discussed. A highly developed appreciation of music and song often forms an integral part of this world view and, indeed, it was by means of the performance of songs and dances that such feelings were most intensely elicited in many cases.

The structure of the dance in Tory, then, specifically meant to create an *óíche mhór*, where the night was kept ‘up’ and where the participants might enjoy the entertainment with high spirits and good humour. However, through the enactment of particular dances, songs, and other forms, associated with other community members, no longer alive, or emigrated, these same high spirits might elicit feelings of *cumha*, of longing for those departed (Ó Laoire, 1999a). This was directly related to the physical heat created by exertion, which was linked to the emotional heat and which attempted to keep people *te dá chéile*, feelings akin to Turner’s
(1969) concept of communitas. Anathema to this was the departure of the elders, which led to a physical and emotional cooling leaving the night fuar and uaigneach. In a very real sense, then, the dance celebrated community and created a continuity between the living and the dead, between those absent and those present. From this point of view, strong similarities can be observed between the dance and the merry wake, a ritual developed to a high degree by the Irish in the past (Ó Súilleabháin, 1967) and encompassing much the same kind of behavior as was expected at the dances. I would argue, then, that a similar conceptual framework underpins the idea of the “merry wake”, discussed recently by Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, where he argues convincingly that (1998, 193):

the merry wake became a focus . . . for the carnivalesque element of social life, which was increasingly denied expression in those other domains subject to those wielding new civil and clerical forms of social control . . . In the . . . games played at wakes, the matter of culture and the matter of history mingle in ways which articulated in traditional symbolic language both a commentary on and a resistance to social forces threatening the continuance of old ways and old mentalities.

Consequently, the merry wake, and by extension, the event sometimes known as the American Wake, the party given for emigrants on the final night before their departure abroad, can also been seen to rest on such assumptions.

This interrelated complex of conceptual metaphors can be further extended to include the Gaelic cosmological worldview. Specifically, according to the Gaelic view of the world, the south (an aird ó dheas, an deisceart) is considered to be “upwards”. Travelling southwards, then, is, or was, before people became familiar with maps, almost invariably ag dul suas “going upwards”. Conversely, ag dul síos “going down” means going northwards. The south is deas, nice, pretty and also associated with an taoth deas “the right hand side,” where the north an aird ó thuaidh is associated with the left side an taoth clé or ciotach, associated specifically in the Latin term sinister, with evil and death and cold. Consequently, the metaphors I have been discussing can be seen to be linked at a profound
level to an older Indo-European system for ordering the universe, which is not exclusively confined to the Gaelic world.

Kerby A. Miller’s (1985) monumentally detailed study of the Irish exodus to North America, found that the Irish were the most homesick of all emigrants in the United States and that in their ballads and private correspondence, these feelings were constantly vented. He contends that the “Gaelic Catholic disability” (Akenson:1993), of which the metaphorical concepts I am describing form an integral part, contributed in a major way to the Irish concept of themselves as exiles as opposed to voluntary emigrants. Although he accepts that this formed part of a resistance strategy, he often refers to Gaelic cultural ideals as communal, traditional, static and inert, inculcating “non-responsibility” with regard to individual initiative in general and towards emigration in particular. Gaelic culture certainly did place a high value on communal traditions as is evidenced from the ubiquity of the American Wake phenomenon, according to Miller. As he himself points out, however, Gaelic culture did not exist in isolation, and dual and hybridized forms of it developed. Miller’s inflexible framework is unable to see that such metaphorical concepts as I have been interpreting here, and which he deems archaic and traditional, formed a meaningful system in their own right. His is an evolutionary orientation, constructed in a rigid binary polarity, which does not situate individual adventurism as also traditionally derived from a radically different historical moment, but implies that it is the only rational, desirable norm. Gaelic culture probably was suspicious of and resistant to over-individualization, but to say that it was completely inert and static is a gross and unfair exaggeration. The metaphors I have described here display a different habitus, informing how action should be undertaken and focused, one which has helped to sustain impoverished and oppressed communities in adverse physical and economic conditions. That it is not in “cultural lag”, but has been capable of syncretic development and change is evidenced by its endurance into the 21st century. It is not just in such small scale societies that metaphorical systems such as these prevail, as Paul Bohannan’s statement regarding kinship serves to remind us. Events such as the dance in Tory or the
American wakes in the 19th and 20th centuries, in their combination of “gaiety and grief” (559) served as structures for the enactment of such values. By ritually marking the departure of individuals from the community, such structures reiterated the inculcated values of teas, diograis and cúram in them towards their kin groups. Eliciting a positive conception, the evocation of cumha simultaneously bound their members to their blood relatives and protested against a threat to the existence of the community. Such metaphors, among others, formed boundaries by which the community defined itself and differentiated itself from others. The strategy actively intended, arguably, to ensure the continuance of remittances to support the home economy and, paradoxically, to assist others to follow the emigrant’s path. Miller indeed documents exactly these patterns, but contrary to the stasis, inertia and long term dysfunctionality attributed by him, in part, to the structure of the Irish language itself, such a system can be interpreted as enabling kinship to function effectively over a widely dispersed geographic area, providing less intimidating environments for those abroad, valuable networks of contacts to prospective emigrants and much needed capital those who remained in Ireland. In any case, as a metaphorical system, it is certainly no less dysfunctional in the long term, than the “Time is Money” metaphor, dominant in the West, and by which it introduces its value system to non-western cultures, according to Lakoff and Johnson.

The metaphors discussed in this paper form a coherent system by which Irish speakers construct the world around them. They are indeed “live” metaphors in that they have a strong bearing on community and individual attitudes and action. Miller calls emotional obligations following from them “burdensome”, but my argument here has tried to dispel that interpretation, suggesting that, as part of the Irish “habitus” such obligations formed a “natural” part of their world view, which, in adapting to rapid changes, allowed small communities to survive, while yet negotiating workable compromises with the forces that threatened to annihilate them. It was by no means perfect, but still constitutes a flexible, actively constituted duchas, realized partly through the metaphorical concepts which underpin it.
Bibliography


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March 19, 2000