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A multilevel cognitive model of coming out

Wielopoziomowy kognitywny model coming outu

Abstrakt

Biorąc za punkt wyjścia wielopoziomowe podejście do metafory pojęciowej, niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę narracji coming outu zgodnie z modelem zaproponowanym przez Zoltana Kövecsesa (2017), począwszy od schematów wyobrażeniowych, poprzez domeny, ramy i scenariusze metaforyczne. Artykuł opisuje, w jaki sposób te poziomy wzajemnie na siebie oddziałują i współtworzą znaczenia metaforyczne na poziomie struktur mentalnych, które motywują wybory językowe w narracjach ujawniania orientacji seksualnej bądź tożsamości płciowej. Analiza materiału językowego pozwala na stwierdzenie, że wysoko zindywidualizowane historie opierają się na powszechnych, mniej skomplikowanych mechanizmach poznawczych.

Słowa kluczowe: coming out, metafora pojęciowa, iteracyjność, metafora wielopoziomowa

Abstract

The article explores coming out narratives, as its starting point employing a multilevel approach to this phenomenon in line with a model proposed by Zoltan Kövecses (2017), applying image schemas, domains and frames, and metaphor scenarios. It describes how these levels interact with each other to construe the metaphoric meaning at the level of mental structures which motivate linguistic choices in coming out narratives concerning sexual orientation or gender identity. The analysis of the linguistic material reveals that highly individualised coming out narratives are underpinned by less complex cognitive mechanisms.

Keywords: coming out, conceptual metaphor, iteraction, multilevel metaphor

1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics seeks to uncover the underlying elements of the conceptual structure – expressed linguistically – that are common to those sharing a given set of experiences (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Geeaerts 2006). For example, when somebody comes out of the room, they move from one place to another. Movement is one of the most common yet hardly perceptible experiences. We know that if we come out of the basement where we were looking for a jar of jam, we will find ourselves in another familiar place. The experience of leaving a place and entering another gives rise to metaphorical mappings STATES ARE LOCATIONS and CHANGING STATES IS CHANGING LOCATIONS (in Grady 1997 called primary metaphors, Peña 2004 and Rousch 2018 call them sub-metaphors of the Event Structure Metaphor) that help us understand abstract concepts.

Coming out metaphor, when decomposed, reveals primary conceptual structures underlying it. "Coming out", a linguistic metaphorical expression, is understood as revealing one's sexual orientation/gender identity (see Chirrey 2020). This definition highlights that 'coming out' is a metaphorical expression in which the source domain is made explicit. Some researchers state that coming out is 'a movement of LGB sexuality from inside to outside […]' (Lovelock 2017: 3). The definition makes the metaphoricity of the expression clear, foregrounding its schematic properties (Dyrmo 2022, Lederer 2019). Coming out is also 'an ongoing process of always *becoming* rather than coming out' (Klein et al. 2014: 301). How this ongoingness comes into being linguistically has not been thoroughly addressed yet. Chirrey (2020) offers one detailed analysis. Starting with the notion of Event Structure Metaphor, she claims that coming out is conceptualised as JOURNEY. Under this interpretation, travellers are people who come out, the start of the journey is being "in the closet" and the end – being "out". In the analysis of coming out advice texts, she found out that the metaphor of JOURNEY is used most frequently, followed by the metaphor of CONFLICT, GAMBLING GAME, WORK, BUILDING, and DEVELOPMENT. This article complements the above study and puts forward a hypothesis that coming out is complex and iterative, and can be broken down into smaller conceptual components. Following Kövecses's claim that conceptual metaphors may be analysed at various levels of specificity (Kövecses 2017: 2, see also Kövecses 2020a, b), I propose **a multilevel model of coming out**, built on image schemas, domains, frames, and metaphorical scenarios.
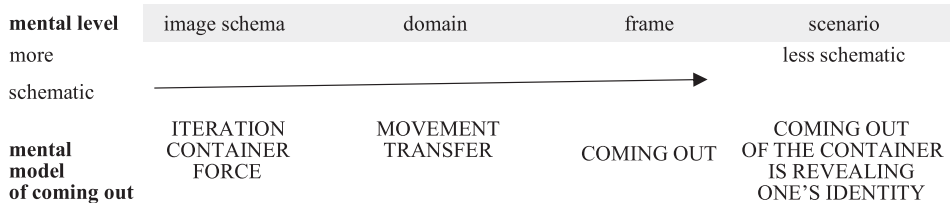
2. Coming out data and ethical concerns

Coming out is a sensitive issue and merits reflection on ethical concerns. Coming out narratives analysed here come from whenicameout.com, which contains over 2100 coming out narratives. The narratives vary in length and content, but all start with the phrase "When I came out…". Users who submit them are free to decide if they want to include any personal details, such as gender, age, and orientation/identity. Here, I do not include any details except those revealed by the authors themselves. For anonymity, I provide neither the gender assigned to the story nor the age, even if given. From 2100 coming out stories that were available at the time of gathering data, 300 were read for recurring patterns and then 70 were carefully analysed by the author. Selected fragments of the 70 narratives are presented in the later part of the article.

3. A multilevel analysis of coming out narratives

Geeraerts says that 'Cognitive Linguistics […] takes the form of an archipelago rather than an island' (2006: 2). The elements of the archipelago work in accord with "a shared perspective" but fail to comply with 'the common rule of a well-defined theory' (2006: 2). This unifying theory has been recently proposed by Kövecses (2017, 2020a, b), who attempts to link all the separate strands of Cognitive Linguistics by offering a hierarchical level-based approach to conceptual metaphor. In doing so, he draws upon decades of previous work, starting with Rosch's (1978) prototypical structure of conceptual system, through Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphor as a mechanism of thought, Langacker's (1987) schematicity in Cognitive Grammar, Fillmorian (1982) frame semantics, ending with more contemporary approaches to metaphor in discourse, i.e., Musolff's metaphorical scenarios (e.g., 2016).

This article applies the multilevel model of metaphor proposed by Kövecses (e.g., 2017, 2020a, b) to coming out narratives. He claims that metaphors 'occupy different levels of schematicity' (2017: 23): image schemas are the most schematic and scenarios (as in Kövecses 2017) the least. Kövecses (e.g., 2017) uses mental spaces and scenarios interchangeably. In this analysis, I use the term "scenario" proposed by Musolff (e.g., 2016) to mean 'discourse-based, culturally and historically mediated version of a source domain' (2016: 30), which I consider distinct from "metal space". Mental spaces, according to Fauconnier, are 'created online' (1994: xxxix), in contrast to scenarios,

which are more stable, and distributed across a community sharing certain experiences. With this in mind, an adapted model of coming out, based on Kövecses (2017), is presented in Fig. 1[1].

mental level	image schema	domain	frame	scenario
more				less schematic
schematic				
mental model of coming out	ITERATION CONTAINER FORCE	MOVEMENT TRANSFER	COMING OUT	COMING OUT OF THE CONTAINER IS REVEALING ONE'S IDENTITY

Fig. 1. A cline of schematicity: Coming out from a multilevel perspective.
Based on Kövecses 2017: 18

As Figure 1 shows, coming out may be structured from the very basic concepts of ITERATION, CONTAINER and FORCE to more complex conceptual structures, such as scenarios of REVEALING ONE'S IDENTITY understood as COMING OUT OF THE CONTAINER. I elaborate on these levels in the next subsections, starting from image schemas.

3.1. Image schema

Image schemas have been defined as 'directly meaningful, highly schematic, continuous, analogue, internally structured and highly flexible gestalts' (Hampe 2005: 1–2), 'recurring patterns of experience that are abstract and topological in nature' (Peña 2008) and 'preverbal and prereflexive emergent level of meaning' (Johnson 2017: 86). Some most commonly described are the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema (e.g., Cienki 2005), OBJECT (Szwedek 2011) and CONTAINER (Pagàn 2016). Image schemas became the basis of image-schema-based theories, one of which is the theory of complex image schemas proposed by Szwedek (2019). He points out that image schemas may consist of two simpler ones, e.g., ENABLEMENT built upon REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT and ABILITY (2019: 10).

I suggest that ITERATION may be a complex image schema involving two simpler ones: SOURCE-PATH-GOAL and PROCESS. The next subsection discusses the specifics of this proposal and elaborates on two additional image schemas that play a part in coming out conceptualisations.

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[1] The concepts used in this Figure are defined, explained and illustrated in the following sections of this paper.

3.1.1. ITERATION image schema

The ITERATION image schema appears in the cognitive linguistic literature early on, introduced by Johnson (1987: 126) as one of the conceptual structures forging our embodied understanding of the world. This concept has been implemented in many contexts, one of which is the study of speech acts of begging (Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza 2002). In that study, begging was treated as an iterative speech act. Authors suggest that the iterative nature of this speech act comes from begging as a repeated action, and the more one begs, the higher the prospects of success (2002: 287). This conclusion is quite similar to the argument proposed here, namely that coming out is a cyclical process in which every iteration differs from the previous one.

Iteration as a complex image schema

The ITERATION image schema is built upon two image schemas: SOURCE-PATH-GOAL and PROCESS. SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, following Johnson, can be used to conceptualise 'any process or activity' (2017: 182), which makes SOURCE-PATH-GOAL connected to PROCESS. The rationale for linking PROCESS and ITERATION is that they both involve repetition: PROCESS may involve cyclical repetition (or motion) that signifies the aspect of MOVEMENT. If so, the domain of MOVEMENT is then inherently connected with SOURCE-PATH-GOAL. They are connected, yet the underlying logic behind them is different and modality-dependent. Cienki (2005, 2013), for instance, connects PATH and CYCLE, yet this connection applies to gesture and does not link to SOURCE or GOAL. ITERATION image schema discussed here differs from the one introduced by Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza (2002: 278). They consider the repetition aspect, but the act of begging they discuss, unlike in the act of coming out, does not involve metaphorical movement but only insistence on the part of the speaker.

The ITERATION image schema may be illustrated by the following examples:

(1) I realized that I was actually gay though so I **re-came out**.
(2) I'm starting to **come out again.**

ITERATION has been lexicalised in the above examples in a two-fold way. Example (1) illustrates the use of a morpheme "re-" with the prototypical meaning of "anew". Example (2) uses the adverb "again" to express the iterative character of coming out.
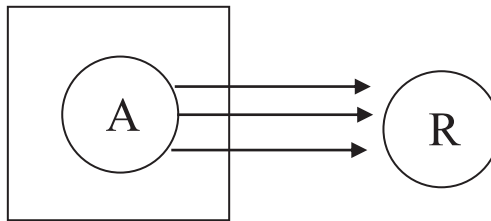
Fig. 2. A schematic representation of the ITERATION complex image schema

Figure 2 is a rendition of the ITERATION image schema based on Pérez Hernández and Mendoza's model – the arrows depict the repetition (PROCESS) aspect of the schema. Added to the picture is the reference to the Agent and Recipient roles, which are crucial to understanding this image schema. People who come out have to disclose their sexual orientation/gender identity many times, so every coming out is different, with a stable underlying conceptual structure shared across different experiences.

3.1.2. CONTAINER image schema

Coming out as revealing one's sexual orientation is also structured in terms of the CONTAINER image schema. Richard Trim notes:

> Anything outside the container is considered to be alien. As we have seen, the use of inside or outside also depends on the perceiver's viewpoint: different sections of society use inside or outside orientation to describe their own particular world (2007: 147).

Trim notices that viewpoint (or perspective) is a part of container-based conceptualisations, which also applies to coming out. The person that is metaphorically 'in the closet' (hides their orientation and/or identity) sees the reality differently from the person who has never had to "be in the closet". Under the view of Queer Linguistics (e.g., Motschenbacher 2010), heteronormativity is a metaphorical space that people are by default placed in, where they have to conform to the pre-established standards and social roles (Motschenbacher 2010: 16). Heteronormativity, imposed on an individual, is thus the context in which coming out happens.
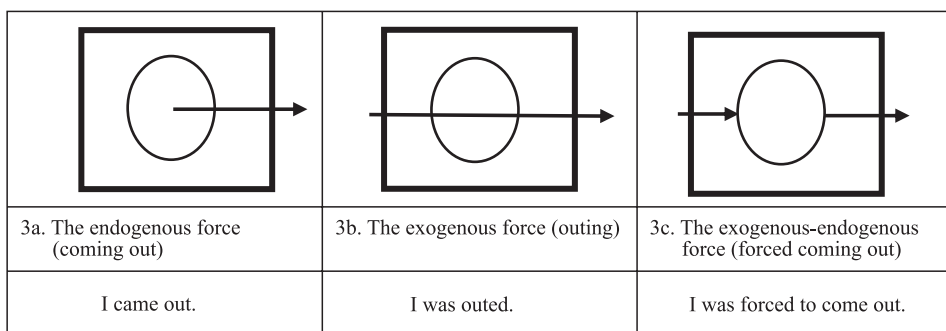
The examples below illustrate how the CONTAINER image schema works in coming out narratives:

(3) When I came out, I was **already out** to most of my school friends as gay […]
(4) I hid **in the closet for four years**.
(5) I'm now a proud lesbian that is **no longer hiding in the closet**!
(6) I was trying to still do the things I wanted even though **I was in the closet**.

The examples are motivated by the CONTAINER image schema, which offers two different perspectives on the same situation. Example (3) and (5) demonstrate the CONTAINER-external perspective of the person who puts more weight on being *out* of the container – the endpoint of the coming out process. Examples (4) and (6) show the CONTAINER-internal perspective of the person who conceptualises the situation as progressing (indicated by past tense and the phrase "no longer hiding in the closet"). These examples show that the CONTAINER image schema allows perspectivisation, directing attention either at the processual aspect of coming out of a container or the state-like character of being hidden in a container.

3.1.3. FORCE image schema

Heteronormativity can be understood in terms of pressure or, in cognitive linguistic terms, force dynamic relations (e.g., Talmy 1988, 2015). In coming out, forces play a three-fold role: (a) the experiencer is affected by the endogenous (from within) force, (b) the experiencer is affected by the exogenous (from the outside) force, (c) the experiencer is affected by the exogenous force which accelerates the endogenous force and is forced to come out. When the source of the force is endogenous, we talk about coming out, an act of *self*-disclosure in which the full agency lies within the person inside the metaphorical container (Figure 3a). In the second case, with the exogenous force, the person has no control over their coming out, becoming

3a. The endogenous force (coming out)	3b. The exogenous force (outing)	3c. The exogenous-endogenous force (forced coming out)
I came out.	I was outed.	I was forced to come out.

Fig. 3. A schematic representation of three different types of FORCE influencing the person coming out

the passive recipient of the force (Figure 3b). In the third case – illustrated in 3c below – coming out may be forced by an external agent acting upon the experiencer – the person in the closet – with exogenous force. Here, the Experiencer, upon being forced, moves out of the container with their own endogenous force.

A schematic illustration of the exogenous and endogenous forces is presented in Figure 3a, b, and c.

The force dynamic relationship is attested by the following examples:

(7) When I **came out** to my parents, I knew they wouldn't have a problem with it.
(8) It hurt that she **outed me.**

Here, the role of the conceptualiser changes from Agent to Theme. Example (7) uses active voice to mark the active role of the conceptualiser (3a). In example (8), in the active voice constructions, another person (she) is the Agent who becomes an external force pushing the LGBT+ person out of the container (3b) Notably, this transitive action is lexicalised via a verbal use of the preposition "out" – "to out".

Besides the explicit reference to one's sexual orientation/gender identity being forcefully revealed, some verbs suggest force-related conceptualisations:

(9) They threatened me and manipulated me until I was **forced to come out**.
(10) And tried to embarrass me in front of my sister whom **she forced me to come out to**.
(11) When I came out — well, when **my dad made me come out** [⋯]

Here, the external force is exploited: in all the examples an individual or a group of people makes a person come out (3c). Linguistically, when outing is mentioned, the act of revealing someone's secret is as conceptually salient as who does it. This indicates that the source of the force is no less important when it is exogenous. If a person wants to come out but does it under external pressure, the source of force appears to be significant. Moreover, people forced to come out in examples (9)–(11) use the verb "come out", signalling that they retain some control over the conceptualised situation. Thus, the coming out process may take one of three forms: (1) coming out performed out of the speaker's own volition, conceptualised as a self-propelled motion (see also section 3.2.1.); (2) being outed by someone else, linguistically expressed in the passive voice used with the verb "to out" derived from the preposition "out" and conceptualised as a process in which external force pushes the person out of the container with no action by the experiencer; and (3) being forced to come out, which is expressed with the verbs "force" or "make sb do sth", reflecting a conceptualisation in which an external force is applied to the person causing them to move out of the container.

3.2. Domains

The term "domain" is captured by the following definition: 'Domains [⋯] constitute the coherent and relatively stable knowledge structure that we have about any particular entity' (Littlemore 2015: 14). Apart from being "coherent" and "stable", they are based, partially, upon image schemas (Geeraerts 2006: 12), which makes them more schematic in Kövecses's hierarchy. In this section, following the basic definition of conceptual metaphor as a cross-domain mapping (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), I analyse the MOVEMENT and TRANSFER domains in coming out narratives. I suggest, following Reddy's (1979) conduit metaphor, that coming out is conceptualised in the domain of COMMUNICATION in terms of MOVEMENT and TRANSFER, both present in coming out narratives.

3.2.1. MOVEMENT

The domain of MOVEMENT in coming out is based on the image schema of FORCE (see 3.1.3). I treat MOVEMENT as a domain[2], a more specific structure than the image schema of FORCE, due to their bottom-up relation to each other. Domains, in Kövecses's understanding, depend on image schemas and I follow this reasoning here. Moreover, as claimed by Kövecses, 'the levels within such schematicity hierarchies do not have rigid boundaries but are graded as regards their schematicity' (Kövecses 2020b: 52), which allows more leeway in interpreting their relative position in the hierarchy. The movement is generated by force and the person that comes out from the container does it either by the self-generated force or is made to do so by the outside-generated force. The MOVEMENT in coming out may be instantiated by the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, where the SOURCE position of the conceptualiser is in the container, the PATH is the movement and the GOAL is the place they take outside of the container. This process is schematised in Figure 4:
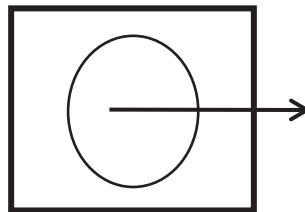
Fig. 4. Coming out as MOVEMENT from the container (see Figure 3a)

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[2] MOVEMENT is treated similarly also in Semino (2005, 2010), Tay (2018), Dorst et al. (2011).

The examples below show how coming out is understood as MOVEMENT to the GOAL (my friends, my mum):

    (12)   When **I came out to my friends** as aromantic and asexual, they were extremely nice […]

    (13)   When **I came out to my mum** it was kind of an accident.

In this interpretation, coming out as movement involves only the CONTAINER-internal perspective of a person moving out of a metaphorical container. Importantly, the movement here is volitional, initiated by the internal (endogenous) force within the self and is directed at the GOAL, the recipients of coming out, as in the above examples: in (12) it is the friends and in (13) – the mother of a person who was coming out.

3.2.2. TRANSFER

Reddy (1979) states that communication is understood as transferring objects, hence we talk about ideas that we *have* or *convey*. Words are objects containing meaning, a message may be accepted or rejected. Coming out narratives are also an act of communication and we can expect conduit metaphor to appear in them. The following examples illustrate these conduit-based conceptualisations in coming out narratives:

    (14)   When I came out to my sister, she actually **took it pretty well**.

    (15)   She **didn't take it well** and unfortunately we had to stop talking completely.

These examples show the perspective of the recipient, being in the spotlight of the conceptualisation. It is perhaps no coincidence that the verb "take", literally meaning "to get something into somebody's possession", is used in coming out narratives to refer to accepting or rejecting the speakers identity/orientation. In this conceptualisation revealing information of one's identity/orientation is understood as manipulating objects. Szwedek (2011) says that object-related (ontological) metaphors are the very first step in conceptualisation. He states that 'structural and orientational metaphorizations necessarily depend on objectification, because structure and orientation are merely aspects of objects […]' (Szwedek 2011: 360). This explanation is useful in coming out conceptualisation as it makes it clear how this conceptualisation proceeds. If sexual orientation/gender identity is a metaphorical object that we can transfer to others for them to see and take, then many context-dependent and personalised metaphorical scenarios may emerge. If "coming out" is not "taken well", the message was not "well-received" by the recipient. This means that the LGBT person needs to come

out to the same interlocutor again, before they accept the revealed identity/orientation. In the opposite context, when coming out is "well-received", the information about one's identity/orientation is accepted and does not require further steps from the speaker.

3.3. Frames

Fillmore uses the term "interactional frame" to refer to

> a categorization of the distinguishable contexts of interaction in which speakers of a language can expect to find themselves, together with information about the appropriate linguistic choices relevant to these interactions (Fillmore 1976: 25).

Following this definition coming out can be understood as a "distinguishable context of interaction". Speakers who intend to come out find themselves doing so many times: their experience becomes a recurrent pattern, a frame. Individuals from the LGBT+ community that have experienced coming and acquired the coming out frame, know that they need to make certain linguistic choices to communicate their non-normativity successfully. These linguistic choices are situational and context-dependent, but still conform to the overall shared frame.

Frames '[i]nclude semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames' (Lakoff 2010: 71). This allows us to understand coming out as a complex frame including a number of Roles and Relations.

3.3.1. COMING OUT frame

I suggest that coming out is a complex frame motivated by various more schematic conceptual structures. It follows from the multilevel approach (see Introduction) that frames rely on image schemas and domains, but they are less schematic. Coming out frame, therefore, is construed as a complex network of Roles and Relations[3] (see Lakoff 2010, Fillmore 2003b):

Table 1 lists the specific coming out frames emerging from the data. All of them use the previously discussed lower-level conceptual mechanisms. (1) is motivated by the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema and the domain of MOVEMENT. The image schema of FORCE is prominent in (2) and (3a). Frames in (3) rely on the elements of the TRANSFER domain, where the

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[3] By semantic roles I mean roles and relations as understood in Case Grammar. Lakoff's (2010) understanding follows Frame Semantics, with roles and relations as elements of the frame, not description of the grammatical structure.

Table 1. Elements of the COMING OUT frame

Elements of the frame	Specific coming-out frames
Roles	Agent, Recipient, Theme, Goal
Relations	**1. volitional coming out** Agent (=LGBT+ person) comes out to Goal (e.g., When I came out to my parents, I knew they wouldn't have a problem with it.) **2. outing / being forced to come out** 2a. Agent (=relative or another person) outs the Theme (LGBT+ person) (e.g., I was outed by my sister) 2b. Agent (=relative or another person) forces Theme (=LGBT+ person) to come out (e.g., My parents forced me to come out) **3. coming out as sharing a secret** Agent (=LGBT+ person) transfers Theme (=the secret) to Recipient (=relative or another person). 3a. Agent (=relative or another person) rejects $Theme_1$ (=the secret) and forces $Theme_2$ (=LGBT+ person) back into the closet. 3b. Agent (=relative or another person) accepts $Theme_1$ and $Theme_2$ remains outside.

Theme (secret) is transferred from Agent to Recipient. Markedly, an object can be either rejected or accepted, as shown in (3a) and (3b), respectively.

Frames, being more specific than domains, establish a pattern that is recognised by a group of discourse participants. Fillmore recognises that '[u]sers already familiar with the frame will not need to bother with the frame-setting part […]' (2003b: 267). Members of the LGBT+ community share the experience of coming out volitionally, being forced to come out, or being outed, as well as the experience of transferring information about their gender identity/sexual orientation to others. While their individual experiences most probably will differ, there is a common set of elements, theorised in Table 1 as Roles and Relations. These Roles and Relations are components of mental models of coming out, shared within the LGBT+ community. These models serve as the basis for communicating coming out experiences: they provide the underlying structure for personalised and individualised scenarios.

3.4. Scenarios

Scenarios are 'figurative mini-narratives that carry with them an evaluative stance' (Musolff 2017: 3). They differ from frames as they add evaluations and further narrative potential to frames (Musolff 2016: 30). This conceptual enrichment of frames admits of a more open and flexible approach

to the coming out metaphor. This section presents fragments of coming out narratives and shows how they reflect two scenarios: COMING OUT OF THE BOUNDED SPACE IS REVEALING A SEXUAL ORIENTATION/GENDER IDENTITY and COMING OUT IS SHIFTING A HEAVY OBJECT OFF ONE'S SHOULDERS.

3.4.1. COMING OUT OF THE BOUNDED SPACE IS REVEALING A SEXUAL ORIENTATION/GENDER IDENTITY

Coming out of the closet as a metaphor means revealing one's sexual orientation/ gender identity. This metaphor may be semantically elaborated with evaluative and narrative parts, creating a specific, discourse-bound scenario.

> (16) When I **came out** to my new class, they were like 'cool' and that was the end of it. Later that day I came out to my old schoolfriends, and they were all really supportive and helped me through the times my mum was being homophobic.

This fragment uses the coming out metaphor evaluatively (*they were all really supportive*; *my mum was being homophobic*). From the unfolding narrative we learn that the first coming out happened at school with the positive outcome, but coming out to their mother was the reverse. It thus follows the pattern of frame 3a and 3b from Table 1.

> (17) When I **came out** it was a few days after my best friend came out and I tried to tell my mum immediately. Then she told me not to follow the trend and to not label myself. I **came out to** my best friend and another two friends; they accepted me because one of them was bi. I haven't **come out to** my dad and I haven't since talked to my mum about it, I just don't know how. I'm scared other people will unfriend me because my friend **came out to a guy** and he didn't want to be her friend anymore. I'm just really hoping that my giant family isn't homophobic.

This coming out story is motivated by frame 1: volitional coming out and the image schema of ITERATION. It describes a series of coming outs, showing that coming out is an iterative process: a person taking this step reveals their identity/sexual orientation many times. Here, the speaker comes out first to their mother and then to their friends. The person realises the need to repeat the process by coming out to their father and the rest of the family. Coming out is evaluated as connected with fear and uncertainty.

3.4.2. COMING OUT IS SHIFTING A HEAVY OBJECT OFF ONE'S SHOULDERS

Coming out can be conceptualised as shifting some kind of burden off one's shoulders. This aspect is evident in several narratives:

(18) No one else knows about me, and only one other person knows about her, but **it felt so freeing** when I told her, like **I had this great weight lifted off my chest**, and since then I've felt more like me, and more accepting of myself than ever.

(19) I was crying and when I finally told her she said she didn't mind and was really supportive. It was **such a weight off my shoulders** and now I have to work on telling my dad and sister.

The person in (18) conveys the sense of freedom after coming out, underpinned by frame 3: sharing an object. The aspect of freedom is connected with the metaphor SECRETS ARE HEAVY OBJECTS and PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN IS PHYSICAL BURDEN, illustrated later in the story. With a heavy object lifted, the person can 'feel more like them'. In this example, lifting a heavy object enables the person to feel more accepting of themselves. This is also supported experimentally: people who think of secrets 'feel physically burdened' (Slepian et al. 2012: 622). It is stated that 'important meaningful secrets, including those regarding […] sexual orientation, affected individuals across numerous domains, as if they were physically burdened' (Slepian et al. 2012: 622). Following this interpretation, at the conceptual level, lifting a heavy object is enabling motion, so the person feels free to move.
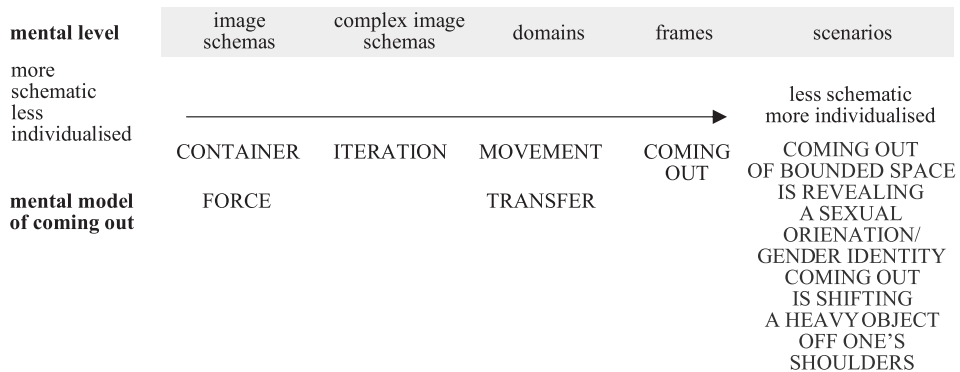
The scenarios, though based on the same conceptual metaphor, vary in content. In (18) the difference is the place from which the weight is lifted – the chest, prompting a different conceptualisation. In (19) it is the shoulders. The result of coming out in (19) implies a sense of progress: the person who has come out once now plans to do so to other members of their family. In (18) the endpoint is the feeling of acceptance and freedom. Those specific elements show individual differences – both at the lexical and conceptual level – that make the scenarios distinct.

Narratives in (18) and (19) are evidence of one more frame contributing to the understanding of the coming out experiences. Here the orientation and identity are conceptualised as heavy objects, motivated by the OBJECT image schema, but unlike in the TRANSFER schema, they are not presented to the interlocutors, but rather lifted from the body of the Experiencer.

4. Discussion

Kövecses states that 'conceptual metaphors cannot and should not be linked to a single conceptual structure, such as frames or domains' (2017: 24) and proposes a more comprehensive hierarchical approach. We can thus analyse coming out at many interconnected levels. Image schemas suggest that coming out is construed as forces, and might be iterative. Domains help us gain an understanding of how image schemas act with one another to create even more complex structures - frames. Frames feed into scenarios, allowing a flexible approach to discourse and metaphor. Additionally, simpler image schemas may merge into complex image schemas, such as ITERATION. This complex image schema is helpful in explaining coming out as a processual more than a one-time event. Some researchers have suggested that coming out is actually never completed and should be seen more as a career than a process (see Guittar 2014).

Taking the complex and iterative character of coming out into account, the revised version of the schematicity hierarchy is presented below:

mental level	image schemas	complex image schemas	domains	frames	scenarios
more schematic less individualised					less schematic more individualised
	CONTAINER	ITERATION	MOVEMENT	COMING OUT	COMING OUT OF BOUNDED SPACE IS REVEALING A SEXUAL ORIENTATION/ GENDER IDENTITY
mental model of coming out	FORCE		TRANSFER		COMING OUT IS SHIFTING A HEAVY OBJECT OFF ONE'S SHOULDERS

Fig. 5. An elaborated version of the schematicity continuum of mental representation

This schematicity continuum comprises elements of mental representation that may have a part in metaphorical conceptualisations. We see that these conceptual structures vary in terms of personalisation/individualisation. Image schemas are the least prone to variation because they are pre-conceptual and acquired via interactions with the world, whereas metaphorical scenarios, representing stable cumulative knowledge of frames enriched with values, are more variable.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to analyse coming out narratives from the multilevel perspective of conceptual metaphor proposed by Kövecses (2017, 2020a, b). The analysis of selected coming out narratives shows that coming out metaphor is constructed by many more schematic and less schematic cognitive structures: ITERATION and FORCE image schemas, the domains of MOVEMENT and TRANSFER, frames, and evaluative, axiologically loaded scenarios. Further research should focus on a more comprehensive, multimodal analysis of coming out narratives across many contexts. It is to be seen how coming out is conceptualised in the visual or gestural mode or how people talk about coming out experiences in natural conversations. An exploratory study in one language is not enough to capture the complexity of coming out: more fine-grained analyses in different languages are necessary to support the presented model and learn more about how coming out is understood.

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