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Why It's Hard to Replace the 'Fiscal Cliff' Metaphor

by George Lakoff

Writers on economics have been talking since the election about why the "fiscal cliff" metaphor is misleading. Alternative metaphors have been offered like the fiscal hill, fiscal curb, and fiscal showdown, as if one metaphor could easily be replaced by another that makes more sense of the real situation. But none of the alternatives has stuck, nor has the fiscal cliff metaphor been abandoned. Why? Why do some metaphors have far more staying power than others, even when they give a misleading picture of a crucial national issue?
The reason has to do with the way that metaphorical thought and language work in the brain. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, "fiscal cliff" is not a simple metaphor bringing "fiscal" together with "cliff." It is instead a linguistic metaphor that is understood via a highly integrated cascade of other deeper and more general conceptual metaphors.

A cascade is a neural circuit containing and coordinating neural circuits in various parts of the brain.

Because we think with our brains, every thought we have is physical, constituted by neural circuitry. Because about 98 percent of conscious thought has an unconscious neural substrate, we are rarely aware of conceptual metaphors. And because the brain is a physical system governed by conservation of energy, a tightly integrated cascade of neural metaphor circuits is more likely to be learned, remembered, and readily activated.

Let's take a look at the metaphorical complexity of "fiscal cliff" and how the metaphors that comprise it fit together. The simplest, is the metaphor named**MoreIsUp**, which is a neural circuit linking two distinct brain regions, one for verticality and one for quantity. It is a high-level general metaphor widespread throughout the world, and occurs in a vast number of sentences like "turn the radio up," "the temperature fell," and so on.
The economy is seen as moving forward and either moving up, moving down or staying level, where verticality metaphorically indicates the value of economic indicators like the GDP or a stock market average. These are indicators of economic activity such as overall spending on goods and services or the sale of stocks. Why is economic activity conceptualized as motion? Because a common conceptual metaphor is being used: **ActivityIsMotion**, as in sentences like "The project is

moving along smoothly," "The remodeling is getting bogged down," and so on. The common metaphor **TheFutureIsAhead** accounts for why the motion is "forward." In a diagram of changes over time in a stock market or the GDP, the metaphor used is**ThePastIsLeft** and **TheFutureIsRight**, which is why the diagram goes from left to right when the economy is conceptualized as moving "forward."
When Ben Bernanke spoke of the "fiscal cliff," he undoubtedly had in mind a graph of the economy moving along, left to right, on a slight incline and then suddenly dropping way down, which looks like a line drawing of a cliff from the side view. Such a graph has values built in via the metaphor **GoodIsUp**. Going down over the cliff is thus bad.
The administration has the goal of increasing GDP. Here common metaphors apply:**SuccessIsUp** and **FailingIsFalling**. Hence going over the fiscal cliff would be a serious failure for the administration and harm for the populace.
These metaphors fit together tightly in the usual graph of changes in economic activity over time, together with the metaphorical interpretation of the graph. From the neural perspective, these metaphors form a tightly integrated neural cascade -- so tightly integrated and so natural that we barely notice them, if we notice them at all.

There is, of course, more content to the "fiscal cliff." Imagine driving toward a cliff with the possibility of going over. The car you are in is out of control. The cliff is a feature of the natural environment. If the car goes over, everyone in it would be harmed or killed. Thus, if the economy is a vehicle moving forward without control toward the cliff, there is great and immediate danger, and so the "fiscal cliff" metaphor engenders fear. Thus, knowledge about driving out of control toward a cliff, together with the metaphors cited above, characterizes the implications of the "fiscal cliff" metaphor.

Because the conceptual metaphors constituting the fiscal cliff fit together so well and so naturally, it is hard to just jettison it and replace it with an even better integrated metaphor for our economic situation.

Progressive economists like Paul Krugman and Robert Reich have rejected the fiscal cliff metaphor, but with different arguments and different alternative metaphors. Krugman points out that the idea of the fiscal cliff is tied to an economically false argument about the dangers of the deficit. He argues instead that the deficit is too small and that we need to invest more, not less, in the development of the economy. The real danger, he argues is that what is called the "fiscal cliff" is really an "austerity bomb." The result would be dangerous cuts in necessary economic investments and safety nets, which would hurt many people and the economy as a whole as well, just as austerity programs in Europe have done. And Krugman has correctly pointed out that using the fiscal cliff metaphor helps conservatives because it accepts their economic theory of deficits.

Reich suggests "bungee-jumping over the fiscal cliff." He argues that President Obama should be willing to accept the drastic fiscal cliff cuts in the budget as of January 1. This could either be a "bluff" to scare the Republicans into believing the cuts would be pinned on them. Or it could be his "trump card," since the new Congress could reverse the cuts after January 1.

I agree with Krugman's economic analysis and think that Reich's political strategy is well worth considering. But from a cognitive linguistic perspective, their alternative metaphors, whatever their policy value, are not going to make it. Take "austerity bomb." The **Austerity Frame** is about self-denial. As used in Europe, it assumes two conceptual metaphors, **TheNationalBudgetIsAFamilyBudget** and**TheNation'sWealthIsTheGovernment'sCashOnHand**. Both are terribly misleading. Great Britain is richer than it has ever been, just as America is, if you count the total wealth of their corporations and citizens. The nations are far from broke, but the requisite money is not in the government's coffers. A family budget is nothing like a national budget, because the nation has vastly more resources and possibilities than any typical family. These are the austerity metaphors. The causal structure of austerity contradicts the causal structure of bomb. Austerity implies a long-term responsible form of self-denial that makes your situation better. Bombs blow up instantly and harm or kill you.

The idea is that austerity as a national policy would be destructive, and it most likely would be, but the metaphor doesn't have anything like a tightly integrated cascade of component metaphors.

Reich's "bungee-jumping" contradicts the inferences that arise from the tightly fitting component metaphors of the "fiscal cliff." And though Reich's "bluff" and "trump card" metaphors are instances of the commonplace **BargainingIsGambling**metaphor, it suggests a political strategy, but does not characterize our economic situation.

There are two morals here. First, metaphors cannot be proposed at will and be expected to work, even if they are intended to fit reality better than existing metaphors. Second, when metaphors are tightly integrated, they are going to be hard to replace and we may have to live by them, as misleading as they may be. The national economic debate will most likely continue to be about the misleading fiscal cliff, not the reality that "austerity bomb" is intended to convey. This is a sad scientific truth.