The use of metaphors in organizational theory; the case of social capital

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Abstract

Background

Metaphor is one of the important discursive themes in organizational literature (Grant et al., 2001). Metaphors play an important role in the discourse within organizations as well as in theorizing about organizations. This empirical paper focuses on the latter by analysing the role of metaphor in the development of theoretical concepts – in particular the concept of social capital – through the means of quantitative content analysis.

Some authors argue that metaphors should be avoided in organizational theory (Bourgeois and Pinder, 1983; Tinker, 1986). Others see metaphors as valuable creative tools for developing new theories and insights (Weick, 1989). Morgan (1997) has shown that many theories about organizations can be 'reordered' (Keenoy et al., 2003) into a particular metaphorical view of organizations, showing the metaphorical bases of organizational theorizing. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) go even further, presenting compelling evidence from cognitive science indicating that metaphors are inescapable because they are the basis for our abstract reasoning.

There is a debate about the way metaphor works (Black, 1993; Cornelissen, 2005; Heracleous, 2003; Keenoy et al., 2003; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Marshak, 2003; Oswick et al. 2002, 2003; Tsoukas, 1991;) especially about whether metaphor is simply a matter of comparison highlighting the analogies in the source and target domain, or whether a metaphor does more then that. In the paper we take the latter position and adopt Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) model of cross-domain mapping. This model states that not only similarities and features are transferred from the source to the target domain but that the target domain often gets its structure from the source domain. The metaphorical mapping from the source to the target domain can be rich and complex because metaphors have many 'entailments'. Entailments are the connotations of the metaphor that transport meaning from the source to the target domain. Furthermore, the application of conceptual metaphor often happens out-of-awareness (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Marshak, 2003). It is part of the unconscious mental operations concerned with conceptual systems, meaning, inference, and language. We can recognize the unconscious use of metaphor in organizational theorizing by looking at the literal meaning of organizational concepts and statements (Andriessen, 2006).

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Purpose

In this empirical paper we analyse how conceptual metaphors are used in organizational theorizing, answering Oswick and Grant's (1996) call for more empirical over conceptual work on metaphor. As a case we use the theorizing of the social capital concept and social relationships. There is much discussion in the literature on social capital about the abundance of definitions and concepts. Some definitions focus on the characteristics of relations an actor maintains with other actors (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Putnam, 1995), the structure of relations among actors in a network (Burt, 1992, 1997), both the relations and the structure of those relations, the resources possessed by the actors in a network (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981) or the resources, structure and characteristics of a network of actors (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).

Our hypothesis is that this is the result of a variety of conceptual metaphors used by authors in an attempt to understand the core concept of 'relationships'. Following the idea that metaphors are often used in an unconscious and implicit way we will try to 'reveal' the conceptual metaphors by looking at their entailments. These entailments show themselves in texts through verbs, nouns and features. By analysing verbs, nouns and features we will identify the author's metaphors-in-use (Morgan, 1996) to answer the question: *what underlying conceptual metaphors are used in conceptualising relationships in organizations, how has this conceptualisation evolved over time and what are the benefits and limitations of these metaphors?*

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Methodology

We present a content analysis (Weber, 1990) of three key articles in the literature on social capital. We selected the articles because they each represent the start of a new way of looking at social capital, which is shown by the number of citations. Granovetter (1973) analyses social networks by looking at relationships between people in organizations structurally in terms of ties. Granovetter is concerned with the strength of ties. Lin et al. (1981) study conceptualising relationships as social resources and argue that is the content of relationships and not the structure that is valuable. Burt (1997) studies the networks of managers by conceptualising relationships as social capital. Burt (1997) also analyses networks structurally but focuses more on the existence of ties, in terms of structural holes, rather than the strength of ties in relationships.

For each article we identified all statements referring directly of indirectly to relationships in the form of *nouns* (e.g. Burt uses the term 'broker' to describe a particular role in relationships), *verbs* (e.g. Granovetter uses 'to traverse' to describe the act of relating), or *features* (e.g. Lin et al. talk about the 'status' of relationships).

Next we considered these statements as entailments of underlying metaphors and identified on what conceptual metaphor of relationships they are based. Often this can be done by taking the statement literally, e.g. 'to travers' is literally only possible when there is a path, so Granovetter is using the conceptual metaphor of RELATIONSHIPS AS PATHS when he conceptualises 'relating' as 'traversing'. We grouped the metaphors we found into categories, based on similarities in their structure. Finally we counted the number of statements per metaphor per article to identify the root metaphors (Inns, 2002) in each article and recognize developments between 1973 and 1997.

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Findings

We were able to relate 99% of all statements to underlying conceptual metaphors. This indicates that metaphor plays a dominant role in the conceptualisation of and theorizing about social capital. We found eight conceptual metaphors each highlighting certain characteristics of relationships. We found substantial differences in the metaphors used by the various authors. We also found a development over time, with later authors adopting metaphors of earlier writers resulting in a continuous enrichment of the conceptualisation of social capital. We discuss the benefits and limitations of each conceptual metaphor and illuminate the use of metaphors in social capital literature and the consequent evolution of the concept.

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