

metaphor

Claire Gubbins and Daan Andriessen

Q1

An agreed definition of metaphor does not appear to exist, with theorists and researchers agreeing only to a more general type of description of metaphor (Cameron, 1999). These general descriptions build on the derivation of the word metaphor from the Greek word *meta*, meaning above or over, and *pherein*, meaning to carry or bear from one place to another. Metaphor is, therefore, described as carrying meaning from one domain to another (Kopp, 1995). Essentially, metaphor is a process that presents something as if it were something else such as “the organization is a machine” or “the man is a lion.” Here, we are encouraged to look for and see the machine-like aspects of the organization and the lion-like aspects of man (Morgan, 2011). Thus, for those who promote the correspondence theory of metaphor, metaphors seek to fill gaps in our language and transfer meaning by utilizing one which fits the characteristics of the concept that one wishes to highlight (Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant, 2002). Alternatively, there are those who promote the domains-interaction model (Cornelissen, 2004) and argue that metaphor does more than identify similarities; they can add new meanings to both the source and target concepts.

However, metaphors only generate partial “truths” as if they are taken literally or to an extreme they are distorted and false (Morgan, 2011). Not every aspect of the metaphor in use transfers to every aspect of the concept being described and so metaphors hide some features of the concept they are applied to and highlight others (Goatly, 1997). As Morgan (1997) states in describing organizations using the metaphors of structure, brains, culture, machine and politics, if you think of the organization as structure, you will see structure. Think “culture” and you will see all kinds of cultural dimensions. Think “politics” and you will find politics (Morgan, 1997, p. 349; Morgan, 2006, p. 339). Thus, as metaphors are partial, several are needed to provide a richer description of a concept; each metaphor highlighting different features of the

Q2

same concept (Short, 2001). Likewise, we know that the organization is *not a machine* and that man is *not a lion*.

Q3

There is an ongoing debate as to the value of metaphors in organizational theorizing. Some authors argue that metaphors should be avoided (Bourgeois and Pinder, 1983) as they are ornamental, literary, and rhetorical devices that distort the analysis of facts that should be stated literally and have no place in rational, objective science. Tinker (1986) views metaphors as potential ideological distortions that convey powerful biases that camouflage the underpinnings of the reality to which they refer. Others still see metaphors as valuable creative tools for developing new theories and insights (Weick, 1989) such as in the manner Morgan’s (1997) multiple metaphors for organizations encourage multiple insights on the same concept. Metaphors are also argued to be a “way of thinking,” are unavoidable and are the basis for many of our abstract concepts (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As a “way of thinking,” metaphors facilitate explanation to help describe an external reality but they can also be generative in that they prescribe how it ought to be viewed and evaluated (Tsoukas, 1991). For example, Andriessen and Gubbins (2009) illustrated how authors in the field of social capital conceptualize relationships using a variety of metaphors depending on which characteristics of relationships they wished to highlight. Thus, it could be argued, and ironically so, that theorists themselves cannot but, whether consciously or unconsciously, theorize or conceptualize without the use of metaphor; that is they are unavoidable.

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2 metaphor

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Abstract: An agreed definition of metaphor does not appear to exist, with agreement only for a more general description of metaphor where metaphor is described as carrying meaning from one domain to another. Metaphors are argued to enable us to fill gaps in our language and transfer meaning by utilizing a metaphor which fits the characteristics of the concept that we wish to highlight. Metaphors are argued to add new meanings to both the source and target concepts. However, metaphors only generate partial truths as not every aspect of the metaphor in use transfers to the concept being described. For example, the man is a lion emphasizes the lion-like aspects of man but does not suggest that the man is a lion.

Keywords: metaphor; correspondence theory; domains interaction model; organization; conceptualisation

Author(s) and Affiliation(s):

Claire Gubbins
Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Daan Andriessen
INHolland University of Applied Sciences, Haarlem, The Netherlands

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