Cognition Meets Action: Metaphors as Models of and Models for

Dvora Yanow
Professor
Department of Public Affairs and Administration
California State University, East Bay
Hayward, CA 94542 US
DYanow@csuhayward.edu
tel +1 510/885-3282
fax +1 510/885-3726

Prepared for the ECPR Workshop on
Metaphors in Political Science
Granada, Spain
April 11-19, 2005

March 15, 2005

Abstract
Metaphor analysis in political and social science has taken one of two streams: exploring the roles of metaphor in social and political theories and theorizing, and exploring the roles of metaphor in practice, such as in organizations or public policies. This paper is primarily concerned with the latter. Unlike “theory metaphors,” “metaphors-in-practice” have direct implications for action. One of the intriguing questions concerns their genesis: are they models of some prior and typically as yet unarticulated understanding of the situation they describe and characterize, or are they models for taking action in that situation?

“Practice metaphors” draw on pretextual, tacit, contextual knowledge of the situation; and they commonly occlude alternate, possible subtextual readings of that same situation. They are both models ‘of’ and models ‘for,’ and these two are mutually interactive. ‘Seeing as’ – the practice entailed in metaphorizing – concretizes prior conceptualizations, sometimes inchoate, often known tacitly but not explicitly. ‘Seeing as’ also projects onto the unknown in a way that moves into the future: seeing metaphorically-analogically, the policy analyst draws on ambient knowledge and conceptualizes policy solutions accordingly. I will illustrate the argument with two cases: one of a Government Corporation charged with implementing national social policy, the other of the “evidence-based” movement in policies and practices.
Teachers in urban centers did not just need adequate pay or comparable pay: they needed ‘combat pay.’
– Sandra J. Stein (2004, 60)

In this epigraph, Sandra Stein is quoting a phrase used by teachers in talking about their working conditions in schools implementing Title I of the US federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally passed in 1965 and subsequently reauthorized until it was replaced by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Why did those teachers feel it necessary to draw on a military metaphor – “combat pay” is the additional money, on top of basic salary, earned by soldiers at war – in talking about their desired income? Was the metaphor purely descriptive – some “doily” adorning “purely” descriptive language that could be removed with no loss of meaning, indeed, perhaps even making the meaning clearer and less ambiguous? Or did it serve some other purpose in daily conversation?

One need not go as far back as Aristotle (in the Poetics; see Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 189) to reclaim for contemporary political studies ideas that have bearing on the role of metaphor in political action, including both political acts (among them public policies and their implementation) and theorizing about those acts. Aside from contemporary theorizing about metaphors in organizational studies, significant theoretical contributions to metaphor analysis in politics and policy have been made in work published in the last quarter of the 20th century.
Metaphor analysis in political (and social) science has taken one of two streams: exploring the roles of metaphor in social and political theories and theorizing (e.g., Brown 1976, Landau 1964, E. F. Miller 1979, McCloskey 1985, Myrdal 1968, Rayner 1984, Yanow 1994); and exploring the roles of metaphor in what might be called practice settings, such as public policy issues or organizations implementing policies (e.g., Bosman 1987 and Howe 1988 in political discourse; Edelman 1977, D. F. Miller 1982, 1985, Schon 1979, Yanow 1992 in professional practices). In either circumstance, metaphoric language enables a "seeing-as." The question for metaphorical theorizing is, how does this seeing-as process work? What is seen, and what is concomitantly not-seen? Where does the vision come from, and – especially in empirical circumstances – what action does it enable? Applied to empirical cases, such questions give form to an analysis of the language of policy texts and debates and the language use of implementing organizations that can elucidate communicative difficulties (e.g., the experience of contending parties "speaking past" each other) and implementation blockages. At times, such analysis may lead the contenders to mutual understanding, if not to resolution of their differences.

I begin this paper with a discussion not so much of what metaphors are as of what they do. That is, I approach this topic from the perspective that there is a relationship between language, and in particular metaphoric language, and action, whether that is individual action or collective, organizational action. My understanding of metaphors in this way grew out of my analysis of an extended case study of a government corporation charged with implementing national policy; and so I draw on that work, first, to illustrate the theoretical approach. I then turn to a provisional analysis
of a current example, the “evidence-based” movement in policy and professional practice, which combines the two strands of metaphor analysis – metaphors in theory and metaphors in use – in interesting ways. What becomes clear in this approach is that theorizing “metaphor” in this fashion is, itself, not just a theoretical undertaking, but an action-oriented one as well. That is, an interpretive approach to metaphor such as this – one that sees metaphor in the context of a much broader, meaning-focused approach to the human sciences – is methodological: it combines theorizing about how metaphors work – an epistemology – with practical steps for how to analyze them – a set of methods (see Yanow 2000, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea forthcoming).

“Seeing-as”: Metaphors in practice

Unlike metaphors informing theoretical understanding, metaphors in use in practice settings and contexts have direct, sometimes immediate, implications for action. One of the intriguing questions about metaphors concerns their genesis: do they originate elsewhere and hence may be said to be applied to the situation to which they are brought, or do they derive from the situation itself? In other words, are metaphors-in-practice models of some prior and typically as yet unarticulated understanding of the situation they describe and characterize? Or are they models for taking action in that situation? In this paper I argue that they are both, and they do both in a mutually interactive way.

‘Seeing as’ – the practice entailed in metaphorizing – concretizes prior conceptualizations, sometimes inchoate, often known tacitly but not explicitly. The language of “housing decay,” for example, draws its meaning from some unarticulated,
prior notion that housing deteriorates much in the same way that teeth, or some other
substance in the natural world, decays.¹ Housing is an activity in the human realm:
“housing decay” is not used in a policy context of built materials decaying; it is more
commonly used in reference to brick and cement high-rise apartment blocks.
Therefore, we are more inclined to draw our understanding of its “decay” from a human,
social context. That is, we are more likely to think “teeth” than “wood.” It is in this way
that metaphors are models of prior conceptualization: they embody and reflect context-
specific prior understanding of their subject matter, drawing – usually implicitly, on tacit
knowledge – on metaphoric meaning in its source origins.

But seeing-as also projects onto the unknown in a way that suggests a course of
action to be taken in some future time. Understanding the social problems connoted by
“housing decay” in the context of “tooth decay” leads to a seemingly logical course of
action. When one has a decaying, bothersome tooth, one heads to a “tooth doctor” – a
dentist. In a parallel fashion, when one faces “decaying, bothersome housing,” one
consults with “housing doctors”: specialists in town planning and urban design, such as
those found in the US Department of Housing and Urban Development or their state
and/or local governmental counterparts.² Furthermore, much as when a dentist,
diagnosing an irreparably damaged tooth, yanks it out, housing specialists prescribed

¹ This was one of Don Schon’s favorite examples of policy metaphors. I first heard it from
him in a public policy analysis course I audited in MIT’s Department of Urban Studies and
Planning (Spring 1977). Its elaboration, however, is my understanding of his identification.
I have been influenced in this understanding also by his elaboration of the paintbrush
metaphor (Schon 1979).

² HUD was created as a federal department in 1965, as a result, one could argue, of
attention to housing and urban issues such as this.
bulldozing the offending housing blocks, thereby leaving a gaping hole that could be filled – with newly constructed housing, much as the dentist fills the hole with a newly manufactured, artificial tooth. This is what “urban renewal” policies and practices in the 1960s-1970s entailed. Metaphors, then, are also models for: they embody seeds for subsequent, future action that follows from the underlying logic of the prior understanding on which they draw.

This makes metaphors both models of and models for in a way that is mutually interactive. Without the prior experience of dentistry and an understanding of its practices, it is less likely that federal policy would have led to the wholesale eradication of housing in neighborhoods marked by poverty and crime. Evidence for this claim may be found in the fact that such neighborhoods still exist in the US, yet “urban renewal” has fallen out of fashion. Seeing metaphorically-analogically, the analyst draws on ambient knowledge existing at that time and conceptualizes policy solutions accordingly. The metaphor is a proxy for a much larger, nested set of concerns; one might even see it as a synecdoche, that figure of speech that uses one part of the subject to stand in for the whole (as, for example, when nurses on a hospital ward refer to “the broken leg in Room 17” when they want to know if Joe Green got his medicine). This cognition-action process holds for policy analysts, as well as for other forms of analytic practice (such as organizational diagnosis). In some “pretextual” way – before the analogy between housing and teeth could be drawn in an explicit fashion – the link was made; language use articulated that link, but still without spelling out the entailments of the metaphor. These were known tacitly, in Polanyi’s sense that “we know much more than we can tell” (1966, 4). The knowledge un-articulated was also
contextual: it was specific to that time and that place.

In framing the definition-of-the-situation in one way, metaphors focus attention in
certain directions. At the same time, they deflect attention from other ways of seeing-as. Put somewhat differently, at the same time that metaphors draw on pretextual,
often tacit, contextual knowledge of the situation, they commonly occlude alternate possible subtextual readings of that same situation. This is clear from a metaphor-analysis of the US abortion policy debate, for instance. The names used to denote the two parties to the debate might usefully be seen as synecdoches. Framing the issue as “pro-life,” by the logic of language use, forces the oppositional label “anti-life.” Not wanting to be forced into such negative language, the “for access to abortion” camp narrates itself as “pro-choice.” Sufficiently compelling to dominate the framing of the debate, these metaphors, while directing attention toward certain features of the issue, blind us toward other aspects that might enable reframing of the issue, a lowering of tensions, and movement toward constructive policy-making addressing the concerns of both parties.3

In the housing decay-urban renewal policy issue, the decay metaphor occluded the fact that residents of these neighborhoods had developed a rich network of social relationships that sustained them. In bulldozing the housing, policy-makers did not relocate the residents in a way that preserved these social networks. Instead, they

3 Indeed, after over 30 years of polarization, an effort to reframe this debate appears to be taking place, as Hilary Rodham Clinton (Senator, NY-D) has begun speaking publicly about the Democratic Party’s valuing of life and desire for all children to be raised in loving homes. An effort to de-polarize the issue has been mounting for the last few years as Republicans have gained the upper hand in Congress and as Roe v. Wade, the case that was decided in a way that enabled access to abortions, has come increasingly under attack. For an
were scattered to the four winds, severing these ties in ways that affected their morale (see Fried 1963). Seeing-as, in other words, is also a way of not-seeing.

Much of this metaphor-work is done tacitly, as noted above. We typically do not spell out that we are thinking of tooth decay and dentists when we hear the phrase “housing decay.” We hear the phrase, and its meaning resonates. The American phenomenologist (albeit better known as a humanistic psychologist) Carl Rogers described this process as first forming inner hypotheses, in a subjective mode of knowing within oneself, about what is going on in the event, “making patterned sense out of [one’s] experiencing” from within one’s “own internal frame of reference” (1964, 112, 110).

It is, I think, in this fashion that metaphors proceed from being models of prior understanding to models for subsequent action. Without our paying attention, metaphoric meaning rides in on the backs of words from their source contexts into their new settings; metaphors are the "moving vans" -- *metapherein*, in contemporary Greek - of meaning. From this understanding of what metaphors do, I derive the following definition: a metaphor is the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements in a single context, where the separately understood meanings of both interact to create a new perception of each, and especially of the focus of the metaphor. Subjected to analysis, the surface unlikeness yields a set of criteria which both metaphoric vehicle and focus share (Yanow 1992).⁴ So, for example, “teachers’ combat pay” (from the epigraph) brings together a concept from a military setting with a situation in schools, shedding interesting interpretive analysis of the contending parties, see Luker (1984).
new light on teachers’ work conditions as experienced by them. It was this sort of understanding that led D. F. Miller (1982) to enumerate seven kinds of metaphor – analogy, translation, exchange, contradiction, synecdoche, and metonymy, and metaphor proper – all of which share a referential character, drawing meaning from a source context that comes riding in, unnamed, to the focal context through the vehicle of the metaphoric term.

This process characterizes theory metaphors, too, which at times shape not only conceptualization but also applications in practice. There are many parallels in metaphoric thinking, in both theoretical and practice applications, in feminist theory and science studies. One example, for instance, which draws on the intersection of feminist theories, the history of medicine, and science studies, shows that Aristotle, Galen, and later medieval (and even later) physicians conceptualized female reproductive systems by drawing on what they knew from male bodies, including seeing the fetus as a “little man” and the uterus as a penis (see, e.g., Tuana 1989). Such metaphoric theorizing carried over into medical practices. In organizational studies the 18th-19th century experience of machines carried over into conceptualizations of organizations, marching unilinearly forward toward progress, and, in the mid-20th century, as biological cells or cybernetic devices in the form of systems (e.g., Morgan 1980, Yanow 1987).

In some respects, the perception of public policy processes themselves that most shapes – problematically – our understanding of them grew out of that 19th century understanding of organization as machine. Its manifestations in the bureaucracy

---

4 This definition follows Black (1962, 1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
theory that emerged out of the “machine” or “industrial era” influenced understanding of
the policy process, including the actions of agencies during the implementation phase of
that process. Most traditional, institutional models of policy-making conceptualize it as
an assembly line: a bill introduced into the legislature, moving through subsequent
stages of committee and subcommittee assignments and readings and deliberations,
util it passes (if it does), is signed into law, and is sent to the executive department for
administrative execution (see, e.g., Stone 1997 on this point). Even subsequent
process models that expand policy-making beyond legislative action on both ends adopt
a similar analogy in their modeling, tracing movements (to use the US case again) from
personal idea to general agenda to institutional agenda through Congressional steps to
publication in the Federal Register, to delivery to the appropriate implementing agency,
whereupon action moves down through the ranks until programs are in place. The
assembly line metaphor generates two interlocking "production" processes – the first
produces a bill, the output of the second is a program.5 Coupled with the war theme
that predominated in the US in the 1960s-70s, social policies (and policy theories
subsequently) designated those on the receiving end of this policy program assembly
line as ‘targets’ (e.g., Sapolsky 1972, Schneider and Ingram 1993), denying them
agency in the policy process. These two assumptions –

---

5 While these could be (and are) also described from a systems perspective, a system is a
more complex form of machine. I know of no ur-text that explicitly identifies organizations
as machines, but evidence of this metaphoric thinking can be found in various linguistic
forms that suggest it is present as a framing device, e.g., the individual who "blows off
steam" emulating the newly invented steam engine in releasing pent-up energy. The
linearity and orientation toward progress that characterize the industrial era are found in
referents) and that subordinates act on orders (or risk insubordination) – yield a model that ignores the ways in which meanings are shaped by metaphors, potentially yielding differences in interpretation that affect implementation. Indeed, in this model, language doesn’t come into play at all, any more than street-level workers’ interpretations would (see Lipsky 1978).

This approach to metaphor analysis draws on cognitive theories (such as the position articulated by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 and in subsequent studies, e.g. 1999), but also on the pragmatic philosophy of Schon (e.g., 1979; see also Rein and Schon 1977), which sees metaphors in the context of action. I differ from Schon, however, in holding that it is metaphor “all the way down”: that is, we can neither rid policy (or other) language of metaphor, as D. F. Miller (1985) also argues, nor can we make all of our metaphors explicit (thereby achieving the same end). Much in the same way that Molière’s *bourgeois gentilhomme* discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, we, in our policy discourse as well as in our everyday speech, speak metaphors all the time, ineradicably and inextricably.

Let me illustrate this mode of analysis by reference to the empirical research from which it emerged. Then I will turn to a contemporary case.

**Case 1. Community centers and supermarkets**

My theorizing about metaphors is drawn from an empirical analysis of the policy and administrative practices of the Israel Corporation of Community Centers (ICCC) (Yanow 1992, 1996). An extended metaphor emerged during the founding period at a
time when "community center" was largely an unknown concept in local parlance. While articulating some tacitly known understanding of what the desired community center was intended to be (as a model of that prior knowledge), the metaphor came to shape architectural, programmatic, and administrative action and practices in the not-yet-created centers (as a model for). The metaphor was highly contextual, while articulating prior knowledge and masking alternative narratives.

To summarize the case briefly, the community center idea that spawned the creation of the agency came from the US, having been introduced to the Minister of Education and Culture during a meeting with some American visitors. Operationally, this presented a problem: how to "translate" the abstract concept of a "community center" into daily organizational practices, especially as the direct translation of the term into Hebrew had no particular meaning. How to think about it became clear in the aftermath of an early meeting of the founding Board of Directors during the agency-creation phase at which a Board member said, the community center would be "a functional supermarket." Drawing in a metaphoric – which is to say non-explicit – fashion on the entailments of this metaphor, the founders were able to give shape to center buildings, program practices, personnel practices, evaluative measures, and so on. The metaphor became a model for what a community center could and should be (and it was adopted by personnel throughout the agency during the first ten years, at least, of its existence, leading me to conclude that it had moved beyond the thought

---

6 That is, it sounded like a translation of a non-indigenous phrase: the two words separately made sense in translation, but in combination, they conveyed nothing that was recognizable to a native speaker of Hebrew.
patterns of individuals within the agency to become an *organizational* metaphor; Yanow 1992).

But why should the community center not have been a functional something else – a library, for example? Because the metaphor was also a model of: it modeled context-specific prior, albeit tacit understanding, of the purpose of the agency, its buildings, and its activities.

To understand these two different facets of the metaphor, we need to spell out its entailments. For the first instance, it is sufficient to be able to say what a "supermarket" entailed, at that point in time (late 1960s-early 1970s, when the ICCC was created and developed), in that place (Israel), in terms of its physical design, its products, personnel, marketing, and evaluation practices, and any other dimension relevant to community center operations, moving back and forth between supermarkets and community centers to make the analysis. Supermarkets, newly introduced in Israel at that time, presented a strong contrast with the two other known forms of food-selling institutions: open-air markets and corner grocery stores. Adopting "supermarket-style" attributes distinguished the ICCC community centers and positioned them as equally modern, innovative, and “Western.”

For the second instance, it is necessary to understand what was special about supermarkets “subtextually” – what other, unwritten, tacitly known meanings were connoted by that term that other terms would not have brought into play. They might have emulated other known and familiar public buildings, such as libraries, synagogues, ...

---

7 The detailed, empirical and methodological argumentation for this brief summary is
museums, university halls, concert halls, and so on – but none of these had the cachet
that “supermarket” carried: the innovativeness and excitement that attached to this
new, heretofore unknown enterprise that also came from the West, the US in particular.\(^8\)

This case illustrates a situation in which organizational members "invented" their
own metaphor, which spread through the organization as it was repeatedly invoked in
conversation and in printed materials. It was not created by an outside consultant
seeking to prompt critical (or other) thinking (see, e.g., the "Rumpelstiltskin" metaphor
discussed in Smith and Simmons 1983). It illustrates, then, the intimate situatedness of
pretextual, contextual, and subtextual metaphoric knowledge.

The next case combines theoretical and practical metaphors in interesting ways.
Unlike the first case, in which the metaphor emerged out of the context of practice itself
and is traceable to a single event, if not to the individual who first uttered it, in this one,
the history is much more diffuse, and the practice ranges from the more conceptual
(what should policies look like?) to the more specific applications (how can this
particular policy area comply with this condition?) to concrete implementations. As this
case is still unfolding, my discussion of it is much more tentative.

---

\(^8\) It is hard for many Israelis, even, to imagine this or to remember now that this was the
case in 1967-69. The first Supersol had opened in Jerusalem just off King George Way near
one of the more established neighborhoods, on a major bus line that also served the then-
main university campus. A rather modest building by today’s standards, at the time it was
a major attraction for local “tourists” who would come to see the variety of products in a
clean, well-lit, orderly (by comparison) place. It had, in fact, become such a magnet that it
was the site of a bomb in 1968, killing and wounding several people.
Case 2. “Evidence-based” policies and practices

The so-called “evidence-based” movement in various public policy issues and other areas of practice appears to have originated in the UK, in the context of medical practices. The problematic there appears to have been, and currently to be, the professional practice of administering various treatments whose use is not necessarily grounded in empirical research – specifically, in the randomized controlled trials (RCT) that serve as the basis for experimental testing. I say “appears to have originated” because while the preponderance of published work has been done in evidence-based medicine in the UK, at least one source (Trinder 2000) traces its origins to the US (although without attribution or designation of place, year or issue). As the movement has spread, beyond medicine to other policy issue areas, and over (or back) to the US, various practices have come under attack for not – as their critics claim – grounding themselves in empirical research.

For example, county-based mental health departments have been called to task for administering psychotherapeutic interventions for troubled children – even when these programs have been used for several years – if they cannot provide evidence for their success (Jamal Granick, personal communication, November 2003). One reading of the present Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind” educational policy – which mandates school-wide testing at several grades and ties funding to test-based performance (Stein 2004) – as an effort to institute evidentiary grounding for teaching

---

9 Reading between the lines, I detect an allusion to an earlier call in the US to provide experimental evidence for drug prescriptions; but at this time, I am unable to pin this down any more exactly.
practices. Stein cites one research report’s claim that this policy “refers to ‘scientifically based research’ over 100 times” – without ever defining what that means or discussing who should conduct it (p. 133). Similar efforts may be seen in welfare policy: the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act may be read as an effort to ground federal assistance in demonstrable evidence that financial and other support were achieving their intended goals (see Schram 2002 for an extended discussion of welfare reform).

In some sense, the evidence-based movement may be seen as an outgrowth of the impulse that led to institutionalizing evaluations within the policy cycle: a desire to know that governmental funding – taxpayers’ sterling or dollars or euros – was achieving desired ends. Policy evaluation has its own difficulties, as we know, including problems in determining what is capable of being assessed. The evidence-based movement would, on the face of things, seem to be no different from a call for evaluation. Treating it as a metaphor, however, opens the door to other forms of analysis and insight.

From a metaphor analysis perspective, inquiry begins with a focus on language and its contextual, pretextual, and subtextual meanings. What does “evidence” mean in this context – what is (are) its source(s) and what meaning(s) is (are) carried from there to its focal point; what is it taken to mean and by whom (which communities of meaning); and, centrally, what meaning(s) is (are) occluded? That “evidence” is serving in a metaphoric fashion is clear: it is a shorthand or proxy for an enormous discourse that rides in to any of these policy contexts on its back. Many hearing the phrase “evidence-based practice” or “evidence-based policy” “know,” in some fashion, without
the entailments having to be spelled out, that its users intend it, rhetorically, to refer to experimental evidence – evidence derived from methodologically positivist procedures – rather than to evidence derived, say, from local knowledge emerging from the lived experience of participants in the situation under study, such as might be derived from field research.

Such a methodological procedure follows the scientific canons of interpretive research, based on phenomenological, hermeneutic, and (some) critical theoretical presuppositions (on this argument, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, forthcoming); yet there seems to be no room for such science in the dominant understanding of “evidence” in this arena of policy practice. If this understanding is not apparent in the phrase itself, it quickly becomes so in looking at discussions of the issue. As Schram (2002, 129) notes, “evidence-based” policy and practice arguments tend “to encourage the idea that practice should proceed only on the basis of scientifically validated research results” – yet without considering what constitutes “scientific” validation. For interpretive research, indicators of validity are different from what they are for methodological positivism (Schwartz-Shea 2005).

This touches on some of the central issues in contemporary political science, including its standing as a ‘science’, and in its methodologies. The unreflective use of “evidence” narrows the range of otherwise accepted and legitimate scientific procedures for conducting research. In the context of social policies, arguments that limit funding to those programs based on “evidence” imply that without complete “scientific” “proof” (of whatever the subject is), no action can legitimately be taken. In this case, the metaphor is being used less at the descriptive end of the continuum, as with the supermarket
metaphor, and more at the argumentative, rhetorical end. It serves to close down
debate and exploration – tacitly and rhetorically, it lays claim to a domain of scientific
practice that has a particular coloration; and in laying that claim, it rules out of bounds –
again, without saying a word explicitly against them – an entire set of scientific
procedures: those that are not experimental.

My argument should not be construed as an attack on the use of evidence to
support various policy programs and practices. What I do hope to highlight is the extent
to which the policy metaphor forecloses discussion, much in the same way that “pro-life”
does in the abortion debates. It is an example of the way in which categories of thought
may shape action. As Stein (2004, 22) noted with respect to the design and
implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “One is not born ‘Title
I’ or ‘educationally disadvantaged.’” When naming attributes leads to their use as
labels, beyond mere description, in a metaphoric process that focuses attention in
particular directions, narrowing the scope of discourse through categorizing, seemingly
logical treatments or solutions emerge from the pre- and subtextual framing. This is the
diagnostic model that is so characteristic of policy practices (and organizational ones).
Metaphors can be powerful, indeed.

Que(e)rying metaphors

Language that is metaphoric – that is, that is not a transparent reflection of the
social world (if that were even possible) but a shaping of it – may become a reified
construct presented with certainty as a meaningful category of thought; and this
category then shapes subsequent conduct, as Stein (2004) has shown so well in the
context of educational policy. The question, then, is whether this metaphoric process of meaning-making can be made explicit: can we, through reflection, make our seeing-as explicit in a way that would put a stop to the sway of tacit knowledge in shaping policy practices? This would, or could, arguably, keep us from thoughtlessly bulldozing the fabric of meaningful social relations or eradicating whole areas of scientific practice. Such reflection is, after all, what analysts, especially of the academic sort, are supposed to be doing. Argyris and Schon (1974) argued that such surfacing of tacitly known frameworks – what they termed "theories-in-use" (as distinct from espoused theories) – among managers and executives in an organizational context would lead to more effective management. Schon (Rein and Schon 1977) argued similarly with respect to metaphors in policy practices.

Or would it? The "evidence-based" argument comes at a time when quantitative, computer-based forms of analysis are the dominant modes of doing science among the social sciences. To claim that reflective practices would not only spell this out but enable one to halt the movement because of its deleterious effect on other modes of scientific practice suggests an impoverished sense of the power of metaphoric framing, especially when the metaphor gives voice to accepted views. Such a claim suggests that countering metaphoric power is simply a matter of reason – the reasoned use of language and the rational power of explicit thought.

Instead, one might consider that the invocation of the evidentiary metaphor is, and has been, part of a much broader assault on non-quantitative scientific practices. If, indeed, this is the case, then it is equally likely that, had “evidence” not been the vehicle for carrying such meanings, some other metaphor might have arisen and caught
on that would have joined the same battle on the side of the same set of ideas. It is erroneous, in other words, as Miller (1985) also pointed out, to think that it is possible to get away from metaphors entirely in our speech – which is the implication of Schon's arguments (1979; see also Argyris and Schon 1974). Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we would understand metaphors not only as figures of speech, but figures of knowing. They enact a central pedagogical principle, articulated so well by Paolo Freire (1973): in order to learn something new, we commonly start with what we already know (a principle also embedded in the idea of the hermeneutic circle). And in arenas of practice, practice-oriented knowing leads to action. This is what metaphors do, whether as figures of thought and speech or as figures of action: they take an idea or a set of ideas from a context with which we are familiar and move it or them over into a new context, thereby enabling us to understand the new in terms of the 'old.'

What this means is that we can never get away from a metaphoric epistemology: we seem to be "hard-wired" to see and to learn that way; and metaphors are not doilies decorating daily speech and thought – and ensuing action – but integral parts of it. They cannot be taken away, leaving behind them some perfectly clear, unambiguous set of terms that have a one-to-one relationship with their referents. This was the ideal of many earlier metaphor theorists and of the analytic, language philosophers of the late 19th-early 20th century. It seems, today, from this perspective, a misplaced hope.

Playing with the languages of text – context, pre-text, subtext – draws attention to the fact that metaphoric knowledge operates below the level of literal meaning. Metaphoric meanings are brought into play, in both theoretical and practice settings, without much cognizance of that fact. I'm not sure we can get away from
categories/categorizing, but I am certain that we cannot escape metaphoric reasoning, and categories often become labels which attach identities to others and shape administrators’ and policy-makers’ behaviors toward them. “[A]sking what all the labels mean and questioning how they shape daily practice” – and, I would add, how they came to have those meanings – “is an important start” (Stein 2004, 143). Yet we should pay close attention, too, to the possibility that metaphoric reasoning needs to be subtextual, at least at times, at least for a while. A strong dose of passionate humility (Yanow 1997) – the passionate conviction that we are right, married to the possibility that we might be wrong – would help us move from what Stein called “a language of certainty” toward “a language of inquiry” (2004, 140). We might then be more likely to que(e)ry our metaphors – in the spirit of “queering” the text, to draw attention to their focus, in a way that intentionally “others” the idea, makes it stand out, displaces it from the ordinary and accepted way of thinking – but with a sensitivity to the possible costs of turning metaphors into explicit texts.
References


