

Lecture 7: Rhetorical Tropes

There is a widely shared assumption that metaphor is about flowery language, that it is something associated with poetry and creative writing. But a number of linguists have shown that metaphor is fundamental to human thought and that metaphorical thinking underlies all of our statements about the world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The study of metaphor and other rhetorical tropes has been closely aligned to the study of political rhetoric. Since the time of Aristotle when there was an interest in how to persuade people in the context of public speaking. It was possible to take training in rhetorical skills that would include hyperbole, metaphor, metonym and puns, which we will consider in this chapter. But it is not so much that metaphor is opposed to truth but that it is a fundamental part of human cognitive processes. We continually think of things by reference to other things in order to help us to understand them. For example we can find in children's school books:

The heart is the mechanism that pumps oxygen around the body to feed the important organs of the body

Of course the heart is not a mechanism. It is not made up of components. And this view of the body as being like a machine can itself be traced to the industrial revolution. Of course on the one hand this metaphor can help us to grasp something of what the heart does, through it being like a machine that we can easily take apart and see its workings. We might understand that when the heart fails it is because part of the mechanism, one of its components has a fault. An operation can then be performed to replace that part. In other views of medicine and the human body, such as in Chinese and holistic medicine, this view of the heart as a machine is problematic as it encourages a view of the body as being comprised of separate components. One of the authors has seen an acupuncturist turn a breached baby prior during labour by putting needles in various parts of the woman's body, but not in her stomach and not in the baby. This fragmented view of the body, some argue also tends to shift attention away from more holistic preemptive healthcare that view the body as a whole. What is important here is to grasp that metaphor is an everyday part of language as appears to be an important way that we grasp reality. Of course as we will see it is of ideological importance which metaphors become accepted as these can have massive implications not only for how we think about things, but for how we act, the institutions that we build and we organise our societies.

Arnheim (1969) has shown the important role of metaphor in visual communication. For example we might make a small space between our thumb and forefinger and say 'I was this far away from hitting him'. Yet there was no spatial issue at the time, rather one of mood. We might say of a person that 'they have their feet on the ground' to express that they are a sensible person, as opposed to 'having their head in the clouds'. Yet sensibleness has no natural relation to height, to the ground or to clouds. Such metaphors become so widely used that they come to appear natural.

We can see how invisible metaphors can be with the examples of happy is up and sad is down. Why is this accepted? Why should happy be up? We can say 'Things are looking up. The house price market is sinking. But why should reduced prices be down? Our language is filled with such references. We can say 'we have run-away inflation'. But is inflation and self-propelled being?

For Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and for Arnheim (1969) metaphor is one fundamental way that humans organise their experiences. We understand and experience the world through a network of culturally established metaphors. The system is such that we are often unaware of it. But speakers can tap into some of them in order to make some arguments seem more worthwhile and plausible or to delegitimize others. This is because when we use metaphors we can highlight one aspect of experience but conceal others, such as the heart as mechanism metaphor draws our attention to the fact that it carries out a role like a section of a machine, but conceals the fact that the body might be better thought of as a whole. Hospital patients who have problems that fall between or overlap two specialist departments often experience great difficulties. One woman known to the authors had a degenerative bone condition and recurring none malignant skin cancers. She was treated for each by separate departments who were not used to communicating. It was only have much effort on her part over many years of writing letters that she was finally allowed to travel to visit a specialist geneticist who identified that this may have been one single problem caused by a genetic defect when she was an embryo.

Metaphor domains

In Latin, *metaphora* denotes something that is carried somewhere else. So in communication we transport processes of understanding from one realm, or conceptual domain to another (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff and Nunez, 1997). Here we use the term 'conceptual domain' as it expresses the fact that metaphor is not simply about language or visual communication but about thought itself and the embodiment of human experience. So we understand personality differences in terms of colliding objects. This simply can help us feel that we understand them better and can more easily deal with them, although as we have pointed out metaphors also conceal.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) characterise this process in terms of source domain and target domain. These can be explained as follows:

Source Domain: the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions

Target Domains: the conceptual domain wish to understand

Cameron (2007) showed that when we talk about relationships these are often done so in terms of a journey:

They are just at the start of their journey together
They are going to part ways
After four years he wants to take a different path
It has been a bumpy road for the two of them
Look how far we have come
We'll just have to go a sparate ways
We cant turn back now
This relationship is going anywhere
We've gotten off the track

And reconciliation draws on the same conceptual domain

There is another mountain to climb now
One step at a time

*The feelings that were there at the beginning
I just have to keep looking forwards*

Of course relationships have no natural comparison to a journey but this has become an established way of talking about them. In such cases we can ask how metaphor shapes our experiences and perceptions and how they serve to define solutions. For example if we take the following metaphors.

*Society is an organism
Society is a market*

If we accept the first of these then we have to work to make sure all parts of it are healthy as like the parts of an organism they are all interdependent. If we accept the second then society is a place where everyone has their abilities on offer for trade. Of course in this case it is those who have more to offer or who offer better value who will get ahead. While the organism metaphor emphasises cooperation the market metaphor emphasises competition.

If one of these metaphors becomes accepted as how we think of society, or is the model used by government, this will affect the way we organise that society. It will affect the kinds of institutions we build, the kinds of people who are given authority. The ideas governing education will change as we think of children needing marketable skills rather than abilities and skills that will ensure that our society is a healthy and compassionate community. This might exclude the arts, philosophy and literature unless of course money can be made out of them. Such a society may not have a welfare state as this might be considered to be against the ideology of a society where people must compete.

Metaphor and rhetoric

This is where we find objects, people and events described by reference to other things. For example:

*Banks have said that we must not let the economy stagnate
The housing market bubble has burst
The situation in Afghanistan has overheated.*

Here we find the state of the economy described through reference to water that has remained still for too long. The housing market being compared to a bubble suggests that it was always fragile and ‘overheating’ draws on the metaphor of cooking. In each case the use of the metaphor obscures what has actually happened and can dramatically simplify. Of course such metaphors can also make things and processes sound much more positive or negative.

In the EMDA example we find the organisation will:

work with our partners in the region and beyond to achieve the region's ambition to be a Top 20 Region by 2010 and a flourishing region by 2020.

‘Flourishing’ generally refers to plant or animal life. What it exactly means here is not clear. This typical of the way that in such documents, problems, solutions and

outcomes are all concealed in rhetoric. What exactly will be done is not specified so no one is in fact held accountable. Another popular metaphor in such documents is where we collectively 'build' our future. We 'lay foundations', 'cement' parts together, 'lay cornerstones'. The building metaphor allows the author to avoid specifying just what they will do while at the same time summoning up a sense of progress and collaboration.

We can see the use of metaphor in the following statement

The minister will have to prepare for the political fallout

This is a nuclear war based metaphor. On the one hand it suggests that there has been a big mistake that has exploded and therefore had an impact, and that there has been consequences that could be long term and complex to deal with.

This tidal wave of generosity will help them rebuild their flattened homes and shattered lives

Such lines are typical of journalistic clichés at times of disasters. But here we can see the use of the tidal wave metaphor to suggest something overwhelming and unstoppable that can wash everything away.

Media storm

Storm of controversy

Something that is relentless and can weather and damage may endure for a while. We can say the media storm has passed. But of course storms are not rational nor purposeful.

Other rhetorical tropes

Rhetorical tropes include hyperbole, metaphor, metonym and puns. All of these are typical of political rhetoric and are used to shape understanding of a situation rather than describe it in concrete terms. . In any text we can look for the use of these which are always indications of attempts at persuasion and abstraction. Here we look at hyperbole and metaphor.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole

This is simply where there is exaggeration such as:

'I felt ten feet tall'

'We all died laughing'

I've told you a million times not to call me a liar

But we might find it in news texts for example in sentences like

The demonstration was a mob rampage

and

The frenzied bloody attack

When representing ‘our side’ in the conflict a journalist might want to describe this last example rather as a :

A strategic frontal assault.

In the fashion of Van Dijk’s ideological squaring we could imagine that enemies carry out frenzied bloody attacks whereas friendlies carry out strategic operations. A favoured demonstration is a ‘human tide’ whereas an unfavoured one is a ‘mob rampage’. We can always look for the use of hyperbole in texts and think about what they are used to conceal and how they evaluate persons, places and events.

Objectification

Personification

This is simply where human qualities or abilities are assigned to abstractions or inanimate objects. Again these can obscure actual agents and processes.

The theory explained to me how it worked

This fact proves the point

His religion tells him he can't drink alcohol

Cancer finally got him

Democracy will not stand by while this happens

Terrorism is the enemy of free people the world over

The credit crunch has made all of us rethink

Metonymy

This is the substitution of one thing for a second thing with which it is closely associated. So for example instead of saying I am making progress with the writing and editing of the book we might say ‘the book is coming along’. Or it can be a trope that substitutes an associated word for another word. So instead of senior police officers we might say ‘top brass’.

The top brass (to mean senior personnel)

The suits in the office upstairs (to mean officials)

The Kremlin said today (to mean the Russian government)

The Redtops all carried the story of (to mean tabloid newspapers)

Downing Street said today

Synecdoche

This is where the part represents the whole. This also has an important function of allowing the speaker to avoid being specific.

We need a few bodies to fill the room

*There are a few good heads in the department
I want a new set of wheels
Want a few jars tonight?
We need some new blood here.
There are few new faces here
The country won't stand for it*

When British PM Tony Blair was once asked about the solution to poverty he replied that it was mainly a matter of 'banging a few heads together'. Here these heads represent those placed in positions to implement policy. But through this utterance he avoids saying exactly who he means and this act of what process he will implement to make sure policy is carried out is also not specified. In fact Blair's party were often credited as having good ideas but terrible at actually having these realised.