A note about meta-metaphors

Considering the theoretical implications
of terms used to discuss metaphor

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Although it is difficult to avoid metaphorical language in discussing and theorizing about communication, language, and metaphor itself, the metaphors we use have entailments that may not be consistent with the analyses they are intended to support. This essay discusses and compares the implications of some of the most common 'meta-metaphors,' metaphors used in discussions of metaphor.

Keywords: metaphor, meta-metaphor, terminology

1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that a metaphor involves expressing or experiencing an idea of one sort by using a word, phrase, or expression that is ordinarily associated with an entirely different set of ideas. A metaphor involves several parts, including the word, phrase, or expression that is actually used, the idea that is expressed, the relationship between the idea and the word, phrase, or expression, and the process through which this relationship is understood and interpreted. Metaphor theorists and researchers have used a variety of terms to designate metaphor parts and processes. Many of the common terms are themselves metaphorical, and even the terms that are not metaphorical may have theoretical implications. Writers often use a single term for more than one concept, and often use metaphorical terminology in ways that are inconsistent with the underlying metaphor, all of which can be confusing to readers. Reddy (1993) demonstrated that the metaphors used to discuss communication influence the way we think about and study communication, and a similar consideration applies to meta-metaphors, the metaphors used to discuss metaphor. When deciding on terminology, it is important to consider the potential interaction of metaphorical terms with the theories they are expected to explain.

Most definitions of metaphor involve one word or phrase (or other communicative act) from one set of concepts that is used in a context such that it expresses an idea from some other, totally different set of concepts. To take a recent example, in "Britain's *exit* from the EU,"[1] *exit* literally refers to physical departure from a place, such as a room or building, but here it is applied to a *change in status* with respect to a set of treaties that established rules for economic and political relations among European states. This metaphor has several parts, including at least the word *exit*, the context in which the word is used, the idea expressed, and the relationship between the word *exit* and the idea expressed. I will begin with the terms commonly used for more basic parts of metaphor, then progress to terminology that has been applied more broadly in analyzing and discussing metaphors.

In addition to "*exit*" I will draw examples from a handful of metaphors built around "*rock /stone.*" An example is the nickname given to Civil War General Thomas Jackson, "*Stonewall*," because he was said to have "stood his ground like a *stone wall*" at the Battle of Bull Run. The word was later used as a verb by U.S. President Richard Nixon, who directed his aides to "*stonewall*" investigators who were looking into the Watergate burglary, i.e., avoid responding to their questions. Another familiar example is "*rolling stone*," which appears in the aphorism, "A *rolling stone gathers no moss*" and in the lyrics to a Bob Dylan (1965) song, "Like a *rolling stone*," and was adopted as the name of a British rock and roll group in 1962. Other variations include "*heart of stone*" (Ezekiel 11:19; Rolling Stones, 1965) and "*between a rock and a hard place.*"

2.   Argument and data

In this section I will discuss parts of metaphor in turn (identified in bold print italics) and the terminology commonly applied to each part, using the "*exit*" and "*rock /stone*" examples listed above.

The word or phrase used metaphorically ("exit," "heart of stone" "stonewall"*)*

'*Vehicle*,' '*source*,' '*domain*,' and '*source domain*' are the most common terms used to identify the metaphorical word or phrase itself. If "*exit*," "*heart*," "*stone*," or "*Stonewall*" are labeled as '*vehicles*' they metaphorically "*carry*" the meaning. If

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1. Typography: For clarity I will show technical terms within single quotes, as in 'meta-metaphors,' and a word or phrase used metaphorically in italics within double quotes, as in "*exit*." Technical terms that are themselves metaphorical I will show in italics within single quotes, as in '*vehicle*' (next page).

they are labeled as the '*source*' or '*domain*,' then each is a "*location*," "*container*," or "*political and geographical region*" from which the meaning is taken (as an "*object*" or "'*substance*"). "*Container*" is consistent with Reddy's "*conduit*" metaphor for language. Alternatively, '*source*' may imply that meaning is "*liquid*" (as in a river or stream) that "*flows from a spring*." '*Source domain*' blends these two distinct metaphors in a way that eliminates the "*spring*" interpretation of '*source*' and implies a "*geographical region*" interpretation.

The use of '*source*' is also potentially confusing because it is sometimes used to refer to the speaker or writer who originates an utterance or text and sometimes used for the general set of concepts from which a metaphorical word or phrase is drawn. The use of '*domain*' can be confusing because it is also used to describe a conceptual category from which particular language is drawn, as discussed in a later section. '*Vehicle*,' used by Ortony (1993), avoids this ambiguity, but it also sustains the "*conduit*" metaphor for language criticized by Reddy. 'Metaphorical word or phrase' is straightforward and literal, if somewhat awkward, and it can be expanded to cover other modalities, e.g. 'metaphorical story' and 'metaphorical gesture.' On the other hand, apparently literal language often implies metaphors that are not actually stated, as in metaphorical analogies and metaphorical stories; Dorst and Kaal (2012) suggest 'metaphor-related words' as a more general term.

The word, phrase, concept, or entity to which the metaphor is applied

For "*exit*," this is the status of Great Britain's membership in the EU, the legal and moral rights and obligations associated with that membership, and the legal and political actions by which Britain terminates those rights and obligations. For "*heart*," it is a set of emotions, beliefs, and attitudes associated with religious practice (Ezekiel) or romantic attachment (The Rolling Stones). For "*stone*" it is some quality of the emotions, beliefs, and attitudes denoted by "*heart*." For "*Stonewall*" it is General Jackson (as a noun) and the attitudes and actions President Nixon expected of his aides (as a verb).

'Topic' and '*target*' are the most common terms used to identify the concept to which the metaphor is applied. ('Tenor,' which is also sometimes used, will be discussed in the next section.) 'Topic' is not metaphorical; it is simply a term for what a segment of discourse is about. '*Target*' metaphorically implies that meaning is a "*missile*" that is "*aimed at*" the concept, e.g. membership in the EU, religious and romantic feelings, General Jackson, or the behavior of presidential aides. This can be compared to "*Cupid's arrow*," in which erotic arousal is a "*missile*," "*mud-slinging*," in which an insult is a "*missile*"; also "the *slings and arrows of* outrageous fortune" ("Hamlet", Act III, Scene 1) in which undesired life events are "*missiles*." 'Topic' is consistent with ordinary usage, and '*target*' has implications of aggressive

violence that can be understood as characterizing the metaphor as active and violent and the concept to which it is applied as passive (and perhaps victimized). This may be appropriate in some cases: when a speaker uses a particularly apt phrase, we like to say she "*hit the target*" or "*nailed it*."

What the metaphor is about, the idea that it expresses

"*Exit*" implies a related metaphor, in which the EU is a "*box*," "*room*," or "*prison*" and the "*Brexit*" vote constituted "*leaving the space*," but may also have entailed "*escape*," perhaps even a "*jailbreak*"; at the least "*exit*" implies obtaining freedom from the "*constraints*" of a particular "*location*." "*Heart*" is a conventional metaphor for emotions, originally a metonymic reference to the belief that the heart (not the brain) was the location of reasoning as well as emotions. In "*heart* of *stone*," "*heart*" expresses an idea related to emotional attachments and responses. "*Stone*" is more complex. Relevant qualities of *stone* include *hard* and *unyielding* (difficult to *penetrate* or *break*), *heavy*, *unmoving, cold*, and *inanimate*. In the example from Ezekiel, "*difficult to penetrate*" as well as "*unyielding*" lead to an implication that people who have a "*heart of stone*" are not receptive to religious teaching. In the example from the Rolling Stones, *difficult to break* is implied by the lyrics "you'll never break…," but the most relevant qualities are probably *hard* (as in "*hard-hearted*"), *cold* ("*cold-hearted*"), and *inanimate*, metaphorically, lacking feeling or compassion. For "*stonewall*," the meaning appears to be something like *stubborn refusal to yield or cooperate*.

'Tenor,' from Latin *tenere*, to hold, and 'meaning' are often used to designate the general sense of what the metaphor expresses. Although 'tenor' has a metaphorical etymology, in its English form it would probably not be classified as a metaphor, and 'meaning' is not metaphorical. Authors sometimes use '*target*' or 'topic' to designate what the metaphor expresses, rather than, or in addition to, what it is about.

Metaphorically, as discussed above, '*target*' implies that what the metaphor expresses is the target and the metaphor itself a missile aimed at that target. Since '*topic*' is also used to identify what the discourse is about, using it to identify the meaning of the metaphor can be confusing.

The overarching concept or set of concepts from which a metaphor is drawn

("*heart*," from "*body parts*"; "*stone*," from "*inanimate objects*"; "*stonewall*," from "*structures*"). 'Domain,' 'source,' and 'source domain' have all been used to designate the general concept or set of concepts from which a metaphorical word or phrase is drawn. The original meaning of *domain* is "An area of territory owned or

controlled by a ruler or government" (Oxford Dictionary), a "complete and absolute ownership of land" (Mirriam-Webster); it has been metaphorically expanded to include a "sphere of knowledge, influence, or activity" and, in mathematics, a "set of elements to which a mathematical or logical variable is limited" (Mirriam-Webster). Like '*source*,' the original meaning implies that meanings and concepts are found in a "*physical location*"; the epistemological and mathematical uses of '*domain*' additionally imply that the concepts in that "*location*" share certain characteristics ("*citizenship,*" "*membership,*" or "*computability*") and are under the control of coherent '*laws,*' 'rules' or 'algorithms'. By implication, a '*vehicle*' that "*comes from*" (and "*carries meaning out of*") a '*domain*' may also "*carry*" related meanings that are "*governed by the same laws*." 'Conceptual category' is a more literal way of expressing a similar idea, but with fewer secondary entailments.

Establishing, discerning, or explaining a relationship between a metaphorical phrase and what it refers to

The relationship between a '*vehicle*' or '*source*' and '*topic*' or '*target*' is sometimes identified as a '*transfer*' of meaning, which implies that meaning is a "*substance*" or "*object*" initially "*contained in*" or "*attached to*" the '*source*' and/or "*carried by*" the '*vehicle*,' then "*attached to*" or "*deposited in*" the '*topic*' or '*target*.' As an alternative, 'substitution' implies that the meaning itself is an "*object*" or otherwise fixed and constant, and that a metaphor simply removes one "*label*" and "*attaches*" another.

Another term that is often used, particularly for explaining multiple entailments or implications of a metaphor, is '*mapping*.' '*Mapping*,' consistent with '*domain*,' implies a geographical metaphor in which the '*topic*' is a "*territory,*" and aspects of the topic are "*geographical features*" that are partially represented by the metaphor. ('*Mapping*' is also used for precise relations between mathematical '*domains*.') When Rick Perry called Mitt Romney a "*vulture capitalist*" during the 2012 U.S. Presidential election campaign, the metaphor '*mapped*' supposed traits of an equity/venture capitalist (buys failing companies, sells off assets, lays off workers, closes down plants) onto traits of a vulture (lands on a dying animal, strips off and eats its flesh, kills the animal). However, alternative '*maps*' are often possible. For example, just as vultures actually improve the desert environment by recycling the nutrients from dead animals, apologists for equity capitalists claim that they improve the business environment by recycling economic resources (Ritchie, 2016; 2017).

Fauconnier and Turner (2002) refer to the process as 'conceptual *integration*' or 'conceptual *blending*,' a metaphor that suggests concepts and their meanings are "*substances*." (Sometimes the conceptual '*blend*' is instantiated in a lexical '*blend*' as in "*Brexit*", a popular term for the British vote to end its membership in the EU

that '*blends*' the metaphorical word "*exit*" and its underlying concepts with the subject of the metaphor, *Britain*.) Fauconnier and Turner also use a '*space*' metaphor, referring to the metaphorical word or phrase and the topic of the metaphor as '*input spaces*,' and referring to the meaning or interpretation of the metaphor as a '*blended space*,' in which relevant elements from both '*input spaces*' are contained. Since they propose that these concepts are realized in what they call "neural assemblages," this metaphorical terminology risks confusion with the actual spatial structure of the human brain (Ritchie, 2004). Fauconnier and Turner refer to both (individual) cognitive processes and (public/ social) communicative and cultural processes of elaborating a complex metaphor as '*running the blend*,' a metaphor that itself '*blends*' a "*computer program*" / "*machine*" / "*motion*" metaphor with a "*substance*" metaphor (see Ritchie, 2004).

'*Mapping*' implies that meaning is a "*place*," hence somewhat fixed and static. The '*mapping*' metaphor is also used in mathematics as a metaphor for the relationship between elements of two sets or '*domains.*' If metaphorical '*mapping*' is understood in a geographical sense, it implies that "*objects*" and relationships among "*objects*" are represented in a consistent way. If it is understood in a mathematical sense, it implies that the relationship is precisely determined by a consistent algorithm. '*Blend*' implies meaning is a "*substance*," but '*running the blend*' implies something like a 'computer program' or other machine-like 'algorithm' – a more dynamic (and precise) concept.

Effects of metaphors on public discourse

For the past several decades researchers have described the effect of language choices on discourse as '*framing*' (Iyengar, 1991; Ritchie, *in press b*; Tracy, 1997). Schön (1993) argued that word choice '*frames*' or influences preferences for public policy with respect to urban planning; Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) showed that word choice '*frames*' or influences preferences for policies related to public policy. Tracy (1997) showed that contradictory metaphors can lead to '*frame conflicts*' that undermine effective communication in 911 emergency calls. Ritchie and Cameron (2014) extended this analysis, showing how '*frame conflicts*' prevented the establishment of empathy and led to the breakdown of a public meeting about police-community relations.

'*Frame*' itself can be understood in at least two distinct ways. Just as a *picture frame* focuses attention *toward* certain aspects of a scene (those included within the frame) and *away from* other aspects (those left out), a metaphorical '*frame*' can call attention to aspects of a situation that are '*within the frame*' and decrease attention to other aspects that are '*outside the frame.*' In Thibodeau and Boroditsky's experiments (e.g., 2011), describing crime as a "*beast*" called attention to issues of

violence, *punishment*, and *control* and diverted attention from *prevention* and *treatment*; describing it as a "*virus*" called attention to issues of "*contagion,*" *prevention*, and *treatment* and diverted attention from *punishment* and *violence*.

Frame also refers to the pieces of metal or wood used to give structure, shape, and strength to a vehicle or a building. Accordingly, a metaphorical '*frame*' will influence the "*structure*" of a concept (the relations among its sub-concepts), its "*strength*" (how well it resists opposition or criticism), and its "*shape*" (how the concept is "*perceived*" and understood). In Thibodeau and Boroditsky's experiment, "*beast*" vs. "*virus*" imply quite different relations among elements of the topic, such as *causes*, *risks*, and *criminal justice policies*, and also led participants to "*perceive*" the problem of crime quite differently.

'*Frame*' has also been applied to a collection of related concepts or ideas – roughly the same idea that has also been called a 'schema.' Using the 'schema' terminology, the idea expressed by '*framing*' has also been called '*priming*' (a metaphor based on the action of adding liquid to a pump to make it more effective, or adding a small amount of fuel to an engine carburetor to make it easier to start); '*priming*' '*raises* the *salience* of' or 'activates' a schema. Because '*frame*' has been used to refer to so many different concepts, considerable confusion can arise from using it without specifying the sense in which it is intended.

3. Conclusion

It would be difficult and awkward to avoid using metaphorical terminology in analysis and discussion of language – including metaphor. However, the choice of metaphors, as well as how they are presented and understood, can have real implications for theoretical discussion of metaphors – just as it can for any other topic. Our meta-metaphorical terminology may say more than we wish about how we view both metaphor and language. Does a metaphorical '*frame*' provide "*shape*" for a topic, or does it determine what is "*included in the picture*" and what is "*left out*"? If a metaphor "*launches* meaning *at a target,*" does it "*attach meaning to* a topic," or does it encourage a reader or hearer to *experience* the topic *as* some different concept? When a metaphor '*maps*' ideas from one '*domain*' onto another, does it create similar "*spatial relations,*" or does it apply a precise mathematical algorithm?

My intention in this essay is not to advocate any particular set of terms. Rather, it is to call attention to the metaphorical implications of our conceptual and theoretical terminology, and to the way these metaphors can interact with the theories they express, and to advocate considering the metaphorical entailments when deciding which terms to use in developing and explaining theories about metaphor.

Acknowledgements

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