

### 3. The power of metaphors

---

We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things[.]

(Nietzsche 1873 [1990], pp. 890–91)

#### WHAT ARE METAPHORS?

As discussed in Chapter 1, the functional purpose of language is to convey meaning, and this is typically achieved by the use of abstract codified symbols representing concepts and objects. Nevertheless, this ‘digital’ mode of communication is not exclusive, since it is frequently accompanied (if not replaced) by an ‘analogic’ mode of information transmission, which uses body language or other performative acts, and evokes a concept by creating a reference to similarities and relationships. The resulting communication is less precise and presents specific problems: for example, it is extremely difficult to express negation without recurring to a digital (i.e. symbolic) code: for instance, “while it is simple to convey the analogic message ‘I shall attack you’, it is extremely difficult to signal ‘I will *not* attack you’” (Watzlawick, Jackson and Bavelas 1967, p. 81). On the other hand, analogic communication is available even in the absence of a shared language and therefore can be used in a broader variety of contexts (Bateson and Ruesch 1951; Watzlawick et al. 1967).

Natural languages are different from designed codes (such as software source code or musical notation) because they contain both analogic and digital elements. As a consequence the words we use in everyday language include both a denotative component, their strict ‘dictionary meaning’, and a connotative one, the bundle of emotional and imaginative associations surrounding them, which is highly specific and contextual. For instance the word ‘mother’ simply denotes a female who gave birth to a child; however, the same word can evoke a multitude of different meanings depending on the socio-cultural context and the idiosyncratic individual experiences of motherhood. Mixing these elements enables the production of new meanings, based on the association

of different concepts, with metaphors representing the most intentional expression of this mixing of the literal and the figurative. As their very name indicates (*metaphor* derives from the Greek *meta* [through] and *pherein* [to carry]), metaphors involve a transfer of meaning between two terms or concepts, producing a tension fuelled by their dissimilarity (Ortony 1975). The process is well summarized by Tsoukas in these terms: “a metaphor involves the transfer of information from a familiar domain (called the ‘base’ or ‘source’ domain) to a new and relatively unfamiliar domain (called the ‘target’ domain)” (1993, p. 336). This ‘hybridization’ of meanings can be either unidirectional, involving imagining the target domain in terms of the source domain *or vice versa*, or bidirectional, when the target domain is imagined in terms of the source domain *and vice versa* (Schoeneborn, Vásquez and Cornelissen 2016).

Since “the primary function of a metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one type of experience in terms of another kind of experience” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 154), the perceived likeness of the concepts that are juxtaposed is what makes a metaphor useful. They can be employed either to explicate or to investigate an unfamiliar or confounding concept with the help of a more familiar or unambiguous one; therefore, it can be said that metaphors “operate within the ‘cognitive comfort zone’ of similarity” (Oswick, Keenoy and Grant 2002, p. 294). The similarity which any metaphor conjures does not rest, however, on inherent semantic likeness of the paired expressions, since “similarities do exist, but [...] must be considered similarity of interactional, rather than inherent properties” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 215; emphasis in the original). This means that intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) applies to metaphors because they are typically based on other conventional metaphors. In practice, metaphorical language does not reflect ‘naturally’ occurring linkages between different ideas but “forces us to make *semantic leaps*” (Cornelissen 2006, p. 1584). It is therefore our symbolic action which produces the meaning that we then ‘re-discover’ in the metaphor.

Intertwinement between experience, cognition and knowledge led Nietzsche to view metaphors as a vehicle for the transformation of subjective perceptions in supposedly universal concepts, thus revealing the constructed and language-dependent nature of knowledge: “truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions – they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force” (Nietzsche 1873 [1990], p. 891). Essentially Nietzsche recognized that “our conceptual system [...] is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”

(Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 3). Embracing this view, one must acknowledge that even the concept of ‘discourse’ is nothing but a metaphor, an analogic image connecting many disparate experiences of speech, text, rhetoric, power, manipulation, symbolism, etc.

An interesting feature of metaphors, well recognized since antiquity, is the fact that they can express synaesthetic capacities, short-circuiting different sensorial spheres: “all metaphors, at least those that have been chosen with discrimination, appeal directly to the senses, especially to the sense of sight, which is the keenest” (Cicero 55 BCE [2001], p. 271). Unfortunately, this embodied character of metaphors has been lost to many who discussed the use of metaphors in organizations, who seem more intent on reflecting on the cognitive and communicative effects of the merging of different conceptual (rather than emotional) domains. One example of this ‘intellectualization’ of metaphor is offered by a recent statement by Morgan: “for metaphor to have specific meaning the metaphorical image needs to be tied down and articulated through a metonymical process focused on the naming of detailed elements” (2016, p. 1030). The focus on analytic functions, such as labelling, ordering and categorizing ignores the emotional, sensorial and aesthetic impacts of metaphors, despite their demonstrably significant impact on our cognitive processes (Damasio 2006; Kahneman 2011). One remarkable exception is offered by Hogler et al., who highlight the value of metaphors as vehicles of aesthetic knowledge, which produce “an affective state that simultaneously invokes cognition and produces a crucial sensory response” (2008, p. 406).

## BEYOND METAPHORS: WHERE TO STOP?

It has already been noted that metaphors are generated by the perception of similarity between two otherwise unrelated concepts. In cognitive processes, however, similarities operate in conjunction with differences, since it is the latter that enable us to identify an event or an object as discrete entities: “what we perceive easily is difference and change – and difference is a relationship” (Bateson and Ruesch 1951). So, rather than the degree of similarity, it is the relationship we construct around two elements that gives substance to analogic reasoning. In fact, a pairing of two concepts that are similar is not even perceived as a metaphor but as a tautological statement or a definition (‘a corporation is an organization’). Analogously, when concepts are too distant, the connection is lost and the analogy becomes practically meaningless (as in the statement ‘our recruiting system is magnesium’).

Relationships can take several forms; indeed, there are several types of analogies used in language, based on different relationships between source and target. Rhetoric recognizes four master ‘tropes’, or figures of speech: in addition to metaphors we encounter metonymy, synecdoche and irony. All are based on the juxtaposition of two concepts but are the expression of different types of relationships: resemblance, part-whole or whole-part substitution, and contradiction, respectively (Oswick, Putnam and Keenoy 2004).

Thus, in *metonymy*, a part of an object is used to replace the whole, for instance when workers are defined as ‘blue collars’, from one element of their attire. *Synecdoche* follows the same substitution logic but in reverse, using the whole to represent a part. This is the case of the manager telling a subordinate ‘the company is unhappy with your performance’, thus taking upon him-/herself the identity of an entire organization in order to reinforce the legitimacy of the reprimand (Oswick et al. 2002). In the case of *irony* (and *paradox*) figurative speech is based on contrast, rather than similitude. This happens for instance when an oxymoron (e.g. ‘an oppressing freedom’) is used. These dissimilarities can be very effective tools to expand our visual field, generating new meanings and challenging received wisdoms (Oswick et al. 2002). In this regard they are useful in producing a breakdown in normality by distancing, estrangement and defamiliarization (Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009). Irony can facilitate the emersion of tacit and taken-for-granted discursive components by ridiculing, lampooning or contradicting commonplace ways of acting and speaking.

Different tropes can reveal different aspects about our object of enquiry. Saying that ‘discourse is text’ (a metonymy) is useful shorthand but neglects some aspects while putting others on the forefront (Tsoukas 1993; Oswick et al. 2002). Using a metaphor, for instance saying that discourse is a map (see Chapter 4), opens more heuristic possibilities because the juxtaposition of ideas from different domains enables the emergence of new meaning and new insight into an object of discussion (Cornelissen 2005). The use of these two tropes is not mutually exclusive: for instance metaphors and metonymy are strongly interrelated and their interplay can generate different types of meaning relationships between the source and the target domains, offering different heuristic possibilities (Schoeneborn et al. 2016). By looking at discourses as ways of organizing (Chapter 5) I will fully employ this metonymy–metaphor dynamic. Finally, arguing that discourse is given substance not by a clear referent but by a central lack, by the impossibility to describe, symbolize or to ground its core concepts (Cederström and Spicer 2014), we are utilizing a paradox that not only generates an incremental form of

learning but opens completely new understandings of the idea (something to be explored further in Chapter 6).

Using tropes based on dissimilarities poses dangers. Since any juxtaposition of words is theoretically possible, we might end up with a sophistic use of the analogy, using it as a device with which to parade rhetorical skills. Commentators interpreting complex organizational phenomena might be tempted to fabricate implausible associations with the mere intent of astounding their audience, flaunting their ability to provide a justification for creative pairings of meaning. One could, for instance, suggest that ‘a corporation is like an asparagus’ and then proceed to justify that statement by arguing that this simile highlights how it includes both high-value assets (the tip) and apparently worthless parts (the stem) which are instead essential for its existence; or that it can thrive in difficult environments provided that is adequately tended; maybe even that stakeholders interacting with it can extract value but will also be cursed by undesired side effects! Such a forced use of the powers of language is often practised by ‘management gurus’ who employ contrasts and eccentric analogies to grab attention and to persuade readers of the validity of their less than robust organizational theories and managerial recipes (Greatbatch and Clark 2005). In other words, it is possible to harness the power of tropes not for the purpose of empowering heuristic sensibility but merely to *bullshit* the audience. ‘Bullshitting’ does not simply mean to lie but rather it represents a use of language unconcerned with the truth that is deployed instrumentally to promote the purposes and interests of the bullshitter (Frankfurt 2005).

The possibility of a misuse of analogic representations does not entail that one should stick exclusively to the safe ground of commonly used metaphors. Neither does it suggest that it is opportune to establish formal boundaries to constitute a ‘correct’ comparison on the basis of a quantifiable level of semantic overlapping between the two conceptual domains being associated. It is rather a matter of keeping the use of metaphors grounded or ‘performatively relevant’. With this formula I refer to two connected aspects. In the first place, since the similitudes on which they are founded are not pre-existent but are constructed by the very use of metaphors, they are “primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 153). Second, this social metaphorical behaviour is better investigated not as a separate object of knowledge but by engaging in an investigation based on a pragmatic rationality (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011), which accepts the impossibility of transcending the examined phenomenology. Doing such investigation involves embracing a form of knowledge that is intrinsically involved and critical rather than detached and disinterested.

To paraphrase (Flyvbjerg (2004, p. 405) we should enquire “where are we going [with this metaphor]? Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power [by virtue of its use]? Is this [generation of meaning] desirable? What, if anything, should we do about it?”

Such an approach to the use of metaphors as research tools is explicitly based on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or ‘practical wisdom’, an intellectual virtue that transcends both analytic knowledge (*episteme*) and technical know-how (*techne*), and that implies using the understanding we gain from our enquiry to inform future choices (Flyvbjerg 2001; Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012). This implies recognizing that metaphors as more than mere rhetorical embellishment or effective means to clarify ideas to a non-specialist audience. It means acknowledging that they have concrete cognitive and performative effects, deriving from the fact that different metaphors will reveal (or hide) different possibilities of cognition and action, both by shaping cognition and by inducing particular dispositions and affects. Calling the person in charge of a change management initiative a ‘director’ will produce completely different consequences from considering the person a ‘nurturer’ (Palmer and Dunford 1996; Palmer, Akin and Dunford 2008). Similarly, thinking of discourse as a discipline constructing subjectivity will set us on a totally different course from conceiving of it as the sum of traces left by symbolic interaction.

Considering the pragmatic outcomes of different metaphors enables us also to overcome the epistemological nihilism that could stem from acknowledging the relativity of truth. Even if “the hardening and congealing of a metaphor guarantees absolutely nothing concerning its necessity” (Nietzsche 1873 [1990], p. 893), their use can deploy concrete effects. With all their biases, the intersubjective agreements that are achieved by virtue of the analogical power of metaphors have, as any social constructions do, tangible consequences: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572, cited in Merton 1995, p. 380). To consider these different effects we need to understand the different social functions that metaphors can perform. The observation of the entangled relationship between cognition and metaphors makes it problematic to analyse the ‘mechanics’ of metaphorical production: “the question, ‘How do metaphors work?’ is somewhat similar to the question, ‘How does one thing remind us of another thing?’ There is no single answer to either question” (Searle 1979, p. x). Since it is futile to determine whether the ‘linguistic’ egg comes a priori of the observed ‘chicken’, it is more productive to focus on the performative effects of metaphors. In this regard it is very useful to consider, following Davidson (1978), that metaphors, similarly to

jokes, have a *point*, which someone gets and others miss. Understanding what is the point that a metaphor makes means highlighting their function as interpretive and political instruments.

## THE FUNCTIONS OF METAPHORS: A DESCRIPTIVE MODEL

Metaphors are indeed put to many different uses, becoming “pervasive in everyday life” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 3). To analyse all the multiple ways in which they are employed one can use a simple diagram to position alternative accounts of how the power of metaphors can be expressed. Two dimensions outline the diagram: the axis descriptive-generative and the axis denotative-connotative.

The first dimension refers to the two alternative ways of conceiving metaphors: either as rhetorical devices, the purpose of which is to enable communication, by illustrating and describing; or as cognitive tools, constitutive of meaning and social reality. The first view is coherent with Ortony (1975), with his description of the instrumental role of metaphors in overcoming a structural inadequacy of language and logic. These are systems based on discrete symbols and therefore they are ineffective in describing experiences that are continuous flows. Metaphors help fill the gap between analogic and digital by transferring some chosen characteristics from one domain (‘the vehicle’) to another one (‘the topic’), assisting the recipients’ sensemaking processes by offering an analogy with a better-known experience, conveying inexpressible feelings and ideas and helping to visualize experiences (Ortony 1975). As such they facilitate and enrich communication, by embellishing, clarifying and concentrating information (Pablo and Hardy 2009); as such, they are instruments to represent, describe and transmit complex experiences and ideas.

The alternative view considers the ‘generative’ potential of metaphors, that is, their capacity to create meaning (Schön 1993). The way in which metaphors construct our cognition is well represented by our constant use of ‘ontological metaphors’ in everyday language. These are the implicit analogies that we use to define our experiences and which prompt us to think in terms of objects and substances, thus enabling us to treat complex phenomena as discrete entities (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, pp. 25–9). Metaphorical understanding often trumps scientific knowledge or philosophical sophistication: in their everyday dealings physicists treat time as a quantifiable element even if they are well aware of Einstein’s lessons; similarly, it is possible that even a post-modern sociologist



may be likely to use an essentialist vocabulary when referring to power ('I don't have the power to do so'), despite a firm conviction in the relational nature of the concept. Metaphors might bias perception but they can also reveal new meanings, since they possess a "heuristic quality in opening up new and multiple ways of seeing, conceptualizing, and understanding organizational phenomena" (Cornelissen 2005, p. 753). Such effects apply to the academic organizational discourse, in which metaphors "operate as creative catalysts in organizational theory building" (Boxenbaum and Rouleau 2011, p. 276).

The differentiation between descriptive and generative metaphors has been presented in terms of the *impact* of the metaphor (Pablo and Hardy 2009). On the one hand there are purely cosmetic analogies, such as those that Black (1993, cited in Pablo and Hardy 2009) defines as 'weak' or 'replaceable'. These "superficial metaphors" are used both "to 'dress up' speech and text in order to make it more palatable and in some case more memorable [... or] to aid the process of making the complex appear simple" (Grant and Oswick 1996, p. 216): as such, they are merely a communication tool. On the other hand it is possible to identify 'high impact' metaphors, which directly shape people's understanding of phenomena and which cannot be easily replaced. According to Grant and Oswick (1996, p. 217) these "meaningful metaphors are discovered rather than created", in the sense that they emerge from particular discourses rather than being applied or 'imposed' by one commentator.

The concept of *root* metaphors implies depictions that express a fundamental, underlying worldview and act as symbolic frameworks (Smith and Eisenberg 1987; Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren 2009). The paradox of the deep embedding of metaphors in cognition is that metaphors can become so deeply ingrained in our way of making sense of things that they become "dead metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, pp. 211–13; Chia 1996). These have "become sedimented through habitual use" (Hogler et al. 2008, p. 408): examples include the use of the word 'digest' for an abridged book, or using the expression 'a chair leg'. When we encounter an utterance such as 'we must improve our (organizational) machine', it is therefore important to understand whether this usage conveys a particular paradigmatic view of an organization or whether the two terms are merely used as synonyms.

The second dimension, the denotation-connotation axis, is intended to capture a distinction that is underplayed in most of the above-mentioned literature. It is implicitly assumed that much of the meaning that is carried forward from the source to the target domain is denotative. However, metaphors, as a rhetorical device, can also be intended to persuade or to arouse specific emotions in the audience, their primary



function being “the conversion of the subject from one state to another” (Hopfl and Maddrell 1996, p. 211). They operate through the “predication of a sign-image upon an inchoate subject” for which they provide identity (Fernandez 1974, p. 120), leading to the notion that the ‘movement’ achieved by the metaphor is not just a movement of conceptual content but also a movement in terms of emotional stirring (Hopfl and Maddrell 1996). Such usage draws attention to the expressive and implicitly conative functions of language; that is, its capacity to convey emotions and to incite the receiver to action (Jakobson 1960). The use of metaphors as a rhetorical instrument of political persuasion is well documented (Charteris-Black 2005): in organizational studies Czarniawska (2004) has shown how metaphors are used to dramatize and sensationalize events, with controversial outcomes; in the entrepreneurial literature Lundmark and Westelius (2014) highlighted the use of dissimilar images for entrepreneurship (as elixir or as mutagen) which are loaded with distinctive connotations, thus serving different purposes and interests.

Differentiating between the connotative and denotative components of the meaning that is transferred from one domain to the other does not imply that there will be either denotative *or* connotative transfer, since both components are usually associated. It rather indicates that a particular association, either by design or as a consequence of an emergent usage, deploys its effects predominantly by arousing affects or stimulating an aesthetic experience or by articulating ideas and connecting attributes. A useful exemplification is offered by the catalogue of body/medical metaphors used in popular management discourse to describe the internal conditions of pre-downsized firms that Dunford and Palmer (1996, p. 100) record: companies are defined as “overweight”, “fat”, “bloated” or even “constipated”. While the explanatory potential of these tropes is clearly limited and open to the use of ironic counter-metaphors (if the organization is constipated then change management consultants are a laxative?) the type of imagery they evoke is clearly meant to demonstrate the necessity of the ‘cure’, to project a healthier and fitter future for the organization, to implicitly delegitimize resistance to the downsizing and, finally, to reduce the station of the employees being downsized to that of excess fat, if not ordure. By contrast, the type of metaphors of change management which the same authors identify in other works (Palmer and Dunford 1996; Palmer et al. 2008) represent the change manager as a coach, a navigator, or a director; these certainly have emotional implications but mostly as a device to project different

philosophies of management and organizational transformation, succinctly conveying alternative possibilities of actions, constraints and opportunities.

Once crossed, the two axes inscribe four possible functions of metaphors (Figure 3.1). The *decorative* purpose indicates that the trope is used to describe and facilitate communication, making “novel connections with a distinctive flourish” (Pablo and Hardy 2009, p. 823). In this sense they are a stylistic device that also can be used for pedagogic purposes, aiding memorization of complex unfamiliar concepts thanks to their visual properties (Ortony 1975). If instead the emphasis is more on the content being transmitted, the value of the metaphor is *informative*, being used as a tool to succinctly transmit complex information. By facilitating communication, metaphors are unavoidably enriching its content, activating a circular process of meaning making based on indexicality and reflexivity (Garfinkel 1967). Metaphors have an indexical function since they ground an abstract idea by using a concrete example, acting ostensibly to indicate a tangible entity with which to illustrate a concept. For instance the use of metaphors such as ‘theatre’, ‘game’ or ‘battle’ enables managers to reconcile practical experiences and theory in their talk and links complex organizational phenomena with well-known experiences (Latusek and Vlaar 2015). Metaphors also have a reflexive use, making a specific phenomenon meaningful by classifying it as an instance of a general category or pattern, thus showing that this unique experience is simply a reflection of a recurrent idea. When organizations are represented in terms of biological organisms or as pieces of machinery (Burns and Stalker 1966; Morgan 2006) they are also presented as specific cases of a broader class of phenomena or forms of existence.

On the other side of the diagram we find the more explicitly generative consequences of metaphors. These can occur in two different forms: when a trope is predominantly based on the transfer of denotative information it becomes a *constructive* element, either in the form of a purposely generated heuristic instrument or interpretive tool, or a spontaneously emergent root metaphor. When instead the accent is on the connotative components, we have situations in which the metaphor is used as a persuasive rhetoric instrument, to make emotional appeals (Sillince 1999) or to make an identity and legitimacy claim (Sillince and Brown 2009). Metaphors can also make use of connotative transfer to produce aesthetic understanding (Strati 2010), achieving knowledge that is sensible (i.e. perceived through the senses) rather than ratiocinative (Strati 2007). Such aesthetic apprehension of meaning is integral to organizational life and permits the inclusion of tacit aspects of knowledge that defy any attempts at codification and standardization.

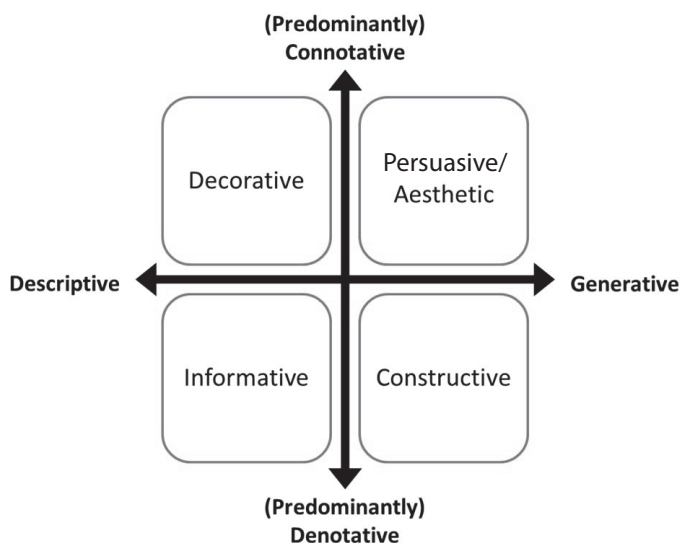


Figure 3.1 Functions of metaphors

Figure 3.1 is not intended as a mapping device to situate different metaphors but as a way to represent and relate the multiple pragmatic uses of metaphorical language. Any given metaphor can deploy its effect in more than one quadrant. For instance the metaphor of organizations as machines is, at the same time, constructive, informative, persuasive and decorative. The capacity to operate at different levels, both helping to describe and to produce meaning, to count attributes and to arouse emotional responses, can account for the success and robustness of different metaphors in use. As such it will be used to ‘design’ the particular metaphors that I am going to employ in the following chapters to expand upon our understanding of organizational discourse, to communicate it effectively and, hopefully, to encourage its use. However, before doing this it will be useful to consider the use of metaphor in management and organization studies.

## METAPHORS IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES

The plasticity and multiple uses of metaphors and analogies have not been lost on organizational scholars: “In organizational studies, metaphors contribute to theory construction, help to structure beliefs and

guide behavior in organizations, express abstract ideas, convey vivid images that orient our perceptions and conceptualizations, transfer information, legitimate actions, set goals, and structure coherent systems” (Hogler et al. 2008, p. 396).

The role of metaphors in knowledge generation has been interpreted in at least three different perspectives: as ways of thinking, as disposable literary devices and as a vehicle of ideological bias (Tsoukas 1993). The first view is coherent with a subjectivist and constructivist position and considers metaphors as subjective images which incorporate particular assumptions, that are simply used illustratively but “are fundamentally constitutive of what is perceived to be ‘out there’” (Tsoukas 1993, p. 325). A prominent example of this conception is offered by Morgan (2006),<sup>1</sup> who contends that all organization and management theories are based on analogic images or metaphors. These frame organizational phenomena, highlighting certain characteristics and hiding others, thus shaping the understanding and the practices of those who use that particular lens to make sense of organizations: in other words their use “implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing” (Morgan 2006, p. 12). It is therefore preferable to consider several alternative metaphors of organizations in order to gain a well-rounded comprehension of their complex reality. Another influential manifestation of this use of metaphor as a generator of variety and meaning is the concept of theory generation as “disciplined imagination” (Weick 1989; Cornelissen 2006), which considers the centrality of the role of metaphors as a vehicle for the production of new theoretical representations.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, realist and positivist approaches to social reality argue the necessity to shun (or at least to limit) the use of figurative language in the account of social phenomena because, it is thought, metaphors are imprecise, lack objectivity and are potentially confusing. They elicit idiosyncratic emotional responses confounding data and representations; even borrowing concepts from other scientific fields is risky because the lack of disciplinary expertise can result in “pushing the metaphor too far” (Tsoukas 1993).

The third perspective recognizes the potential value of metaphors but warns about the ideological distortions that they can conceal: “the use of metaphors resides at the centre of the politics of management theory and practice” (Alvesson and Willmott 2012, p. 87). It is therefore important to reflect critically on the political consequences of the application of a particular metaphor (Tsoukas 1993).

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of my book is an explicit homage to this landmark contribution.

All these different uses of metaphors as research tools have limitations: the ‘way of thinking’ proponents typically fail to explain how different images develop and how some gain more currency than others. For its part, the ‘objectivist’ view, rejecting the use of metaphors, underestimates the rhetorical potential of metaphors and ignores that hypothesis generation requires some pre-existing image of the phenomenon to be investigated. Finally, some critical views appear founded on the doubtful claim that it is possible to produce a truly independent or absolutely ‘non-oppressive’ descriptive framework (Tsoukas 1993).

Cornelissen (2006) offers a completely different take on the issue of the function of metaphors in organizational theory. By examining the aforementioned idea of disciplined imagination (Weick 1989), he strives to determine the factors that make a metaphor ‘apt’ to be used as a source of theoretical imagination. Considering the constraints under which the blending of meaning from different conceptual domains characterize metaphors, he identifies eight ‘optimality principles’ in the literature that can assist researchers “consciously assess whether a metaphor connects a target concept with a source that is concrete, relational and distant and that includes a representation with different relations and elements which can be unpacked and integrated with it” (Cornelissen 2006, p. 1591). These principles include:

1. *Integration principle* (representations in the metaphorical blend can be manipulated as a single unit);
2. *Topology principle* (relations in the metaphorical blend should match the relations of their counterparts in other semantic domains);
3. *Web principle* (representation in the metaphorical blend should maintain a relationship to the input target and source concepts);
4. *Unpacking principle* (given a metaphorical blend, the interpreter should be able to infer the structure in relation to other subjects and applications);
5. *Good reason principle* (that creates pressure to attribute significance to elements in the metaphorical blend);
6. *Metonymic tightening principle* (when metonymically related elements are projected into the metaphorical blend, there is pressure to compress the ‘distance’ between them);
7. *Distance principle* (the target and source concepts need to come from semantically distant semantic domains);
8. *Concreteness principle* (the source concept compared to the target is sufficiently concrete to be understood and manipulated). (Adapted from Cornelissen 2006, p. 1588)

This list of principles can be interpreted as a checklist to predict and explain the success of a metaphor. The idea that some metaphors can be more 'apt' than others because of their compliance with a set of optimality principles is intriguing but it appears to clash with a constructivist view of language. To assume that metaphors have a set of discrete attributes that can be precisely measured and assessed against some benchmark means treating them as neutral objects, and also to neglect completely their connotative aspects (indeed, Cornelissen does not mention the emotional impact of metaphors in the list). This aspect reveals a fundamental allegiance of the optimality model to the Cartesian and positivistic notion of knowledge and theory as context-free, observer-independent and disembodied.

Moreover, empirical observation appears to disconfirm the explanatory value of the optimality principles. Two metaphors that Weick generated and employed, organizational improvisation as jazz (Weick 1998) and organizational behaviour as a collective mind (Weick and Roberts 1993), and that 'tick the boxes' of metaphorical aptness, have been very influential in the academic literature but have had minimal impact on the practice of management. Contrast this with the success of a metaphor such as 'the blue ocean strategy' (Kim and Mauborgne 2005a, 2005b). Kim and Mauborgne formulate the idea that companies should aim to create an uncontested market space (which is like a blue ocean) rather than competing with other sharks for prey in mature markets, creating bloodstained waters that attract more competitors. Irrespective of the actual validity of this theory, the idea of blue ocean strategy has become part of standard managerial talk. Even in the context of academic discourse its impact has not been negligible, with one of Kim and Mauborgne's papers (2005a) receiving more than 2000 citations to date (less than the 'collective mind' paper, but many more than the 'jazz' one). The issue here is not to weight the importance of one contribution against the other but rather to reflect on the factors that have an effect on the propagation of a metaphor as well as to highlight how the successful 'blue ocean' metaphor does not appear to satisfy any of Cornelissen's optimality principles, with the sole exception of the distance principle.

To account for the pragmatic, performative effects of metaphors fully, as well as the intertwinement of emotions, context and rationality that characterizes their existence, I propose that the heuristic potential of metaphors can be better harnessed using an *abductive* epistemological framework, rather than one that is deductive or inductive. A deductive view of metaphors implies a syllogism in which the metaphor is the major premise and a specific phenomenon is the minor premise. Thus the metaphor acts as schemata, a theory-in-use that influences organizational

behaviour and change (Marshak 1996). Deduction provides the typical way in which metaphor-based analysis is employed in organization studies (Palmer and Dunford 1996). If we consider the constructive role of metaphor it is impossible to transcend its use, which impairs the possibilities of a critical analysis: critical scholars could be seen as merely promoting their favourite metaphors (e.g. 'organization as oppression' versus 'organization as a wealth producing machine'). The incommensurability between these alternative interpretations makes any dialectic resolution highly problematic, producing a shouting match between deaf people.

An inductive approach, such as that proposed by Weick (1989) and expanded by Cornelissen (2006) is predicated on the assumption that it is possible to formulate a general theory of metaphor, an enterprise that is fraught with difficulties and controversies, as an attempt at a general theory of language. Moreover the effects of a metaphor cannot be fully predicted because of their intertextual character: they will activate different meaning-making processes in different receivers, depending on the web of further metaphorical connections. If they display coherence (Marshak 1996) it is not because of some design principles but because an intersubjective agreement has been reached through their usage and effects.

The notion of abductive reasoning (Rowe 1987) can offer an alternative. In abduction, solutions are found intuitively by formulating plausible connections between causes and effects and then by testing them in action, using this experience to further refine them. It is an iterative process, one that requires "selective inattention", involving backtracking and switching between different heuristics (Rowe 1987, pp. 102–9). Abductive logic, the logic of what might be (Dunne and Martin 2006), is therefore based on tinkering and experimenting rather than on the application of predetermined principles (Schön 1983). Consequently, the knowledge that is developed is context bound (an abductive solution is not universally valid but only within the context in which it has been developed). The simple model presented above describing the possible functions of metaphors (Figure 3.1) is meant to be employed in this framework. It is neither a prescriptive nor a descriptive model of what a metaphor to be applied in social practice and theory should be but rather a set of design principles that can be used to test how well a metaphor can perform in a particular context, in terms of its capacity to inform, decorate, persuade and construct new meaning. Such design is consistent with the idea of starting research by producing 'mystery' by means of a breakdown (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007) and



with the model of “top down inductive reasoning” proposed by Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011).

An abductive view of metaphor considers the production, use and assessment of metaphors in the context of social practices, thus eschewing the Cartesian separation between body and mind (Gherardi 2012, p. 207). Doing so avoids overemphasizing the importance of rationality in organizational settings, as is the tendency with Morgan’s eight metaphors; moreover, it allows us to consider metaphors that place components of absurdity and disorder in the foreground (McCabe 2016). Since abduction also relies on the generation of new possibilities to be tested and employed in the further ‘learning by tinkering’ process it is also useful in considering alternative ways to generate new metaphors. Örtenblad, Putnam and Trehan (2016) suggest that at least three generative mechanisms are available to scholars: from empirical observation, though conceptual development based on the comparison of tropes that are already in use (for instance developing meta-metaphors), or by extending the relationship between the source and the target domains (for instance building on the view of organizations as political systems to develop other ‘political’ metaphors). However, as noted before, metaphors have features in common with jokes: like jokes their origins are often mysterious and, at any rate, usually less important than their effects. In this regard an abductive framework offers the opportunity of treating metaphors as tools to probe the possibilities of knowledge offered by the application of a discourse perspective to the study of organizations.

## INTRODUCING SOME IMAGES OF ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE

By making a summary review of the characteristics, uses and consequences of metaphors in the context of organizational scholarship and practice, the choice of some specific metaphors that I will employ in the following chapters to expand and articulate the discussion on organizational discourse has been introduced and explained. These specific metaphors are not intended as root metaphors that can be empirically traced in the extant literature on discourse, even if in several cases previous examples of such use can be found. As designed metaphors, they have the purpose of both illustrating and enabling the emergence of new knowledge and meaning. No single metaphor can have the pretence of being exhaustive: on the contrary each metaphor highlights particular

aspects and implications of organizational discourse, seen both as a category of phenomena and as a heuristic device.

### **Discourse as a Map**

As a metaphor, discourse considered as a map focuses on the role of differences and contrapositions and how they can be used to describe and compare discourses, identifying areas of tension that can become generative of transformation or that mark the borders between alternative discourses. The map is not the territory but in practice it produces our understanding of geography, and the act of mapping shapes our territorial thinking and behaviour. Its conventional symbols (for instance the tracing of a national border) invoke and activate concrete performances and feelings. Analogously discourse is not reality but its forms define our experience and understanding of experience.

### **Discourse as Organizing**

Discourse and organizing appear to be intrinsically connected: any organization produces discourses but organizing is also enabled by existing discourses. Discourse is indeed an organizing device, and there are many parallels between how discourse and organizations deploy their effects. The organizing metaphor also highlights how discourses define fields of action where individual actors and groups compete for supremacy, strategically making use of the dominant discourse. It also highlights how the normative aspects of the discourse do not create an 'even pitch' where players can compete fairly but how some positions are privileged over others. At the same time, the set of rules, constraints and 'normal modes of action' that each discourse imposes on actors leave space for individual tactics which, in turn, allow the reproduction of the discourse as happens in any sporting activity: it is only thanks to the players' actions that a game comes to life. Using this idea helps us reflect on the different meanings of organizing and consequently how language and discourse can be employed in different ways to create and maintain organization.

### **Discourse as Attire (or Mask)**

The final mask metaphor is employed to stress the capacity of discourse to produce subjectivities and identities but also to draw attention to the paradoxical 'emptiness' of discourse. Each discourse pigeonholes the variety of human expression, with their emotionally and intellectually

subtle differences and unevenness of desires, into standardized roles. Similar to the masks used in Greek tragedy, in the Noh theatre or in *Commedia dell'arte* they set limits on the possibilities of individual expression and they lock characters in set pieces, limiting and enabling their collective performances. The metaphor also helps us in reflecting on the discourse of organizational studies, discussing the role of fashions and fads, and on the vices and virtues of emptiness.

As discussed in this chapter these metaphors are to be considered as heuristic devices which I will use to probe and critically reflect on the implications and applications of looking at organizations through a discursive lens. I will also employ them as rhetorical devices, to present in a meaningful and coherent manner different theories and perspectives that are either directly inspired or indirectly influenced by a 'linguistic' informed apprehension of organizational phenomena.

## REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. 2007, 'Constructing Mystery: Empirical Matters in Theory Development', *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 32, pp. 1265–81.
- Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. 2012, *Making Sense of Management: A Critical Introduction*, SAGE, London.
- Ashcraft, K.L., Kuhn, T.R. and Cooren, F. 2009, 'Constitutional Amendments: "Materializing" Organizational Communication', *The Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–64.
- Bateson, G. and Ruesch, J. 1951, *Communication, the Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, Norton, New York.
- Black, M. 1979, 'More about Metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Boxenbaum, E. and Rouleau, L. 2011, 'New Knowledge Products as Bricolage: Metaphors and Scripts in Organizational Theory', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 272–96.
- Burns, T. and Stalker, G.M. 1966, *The Management of Innovation*, vol. SSP 6, Tavistock, London.
- Cederström, C. and Spicer, A. 2014, 'Discourse of the Real Kind: A Post-foundational Approach to Organizational Discourse Analysis', *Organization*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 178–205.
- Charteris-Black, J. 2005, *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK.
- Chia, R. 1996, 'Metaphors and Metaphorization in Organizational Analysis: Thinking Beyond the Thinkable', in D. Grant and C. Osrick (eds), *Metaphor and Organizations*, SAGE, London, pp. 127–46.

- Cicero, M.T. 55 BCE [2001], *Cicero on the Ideal Orator*, trans. J.M. May and J. Wisse, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Cornelissen, J.P. 2005, 'Beyond Compare: Metaphor in Organization Theory', *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 30, pp. 751–64.
- Cornelissen, J.P. 2006, 'Making Sense of Theory Construction: Metaphor and Disciplined Imagination', *Organization Studies*, vol. 27, no. 11, pp. 1579–97.
- Czarniawska, B. 2004, 'Metaphors as Enemies of Organizing, or the Advantages of a Flat Discourse', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol. 2004, pp. 45–65.
- Damasio, A. 2006, *Descartes Error*, 2nd edn, Vintage, London.
- Davidson, D. 1978, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 31–47.
- Dunford, R. and Palmer, I. 1996, 'Metaphors in Popular Management Discourse: The Case of Corporate Restructuring', in D. Grant and C. Oswick (eds), *Metaphor and Organizations*, SAGE, London, pp. 95–109.
- Dunne, D. and Martin, R. 2006, 'Design Thinking and How it Will Change Management Education: An Interview and Discussion', *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 5, p. 512.
- Fernandez, J.W. 1974, 'The Mission of Metaphor in Expressive Culture', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 119–45.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2004, 'A Perestroikan Straw Man Answers Back: David Laitin and Phronetic Political Science', *Politics & Society*, vol. 32, pp. 389–416.
- Flyvbjerg, B., Landman, T. and Schram, S. 2012, *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Frankfurt, H.G. 2005, *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Garfinkel, H. 1967, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Gherardi, S. 2012, *How to Conduct a Practice-based Study: Problems and Methods*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA.
- Grant, D. and Oswick, C. 1996, 'The Organization of Metaphors and the Metaphors of Organization: Where are we and Where do we Go from Here', in D. Grant and C. Oswick (eds), *Metaphor and Organizations*, SAGE, London, pp. 213–26.
- Greatbatch, D. and Clark, T. 2005, *Management Speak: Why we Listen to What Management Gurus Tell Us*, Psychology Press, New York.
- Hogler, R., Gross, M.A., Hartman, J.L. and Cunliffe, A.L. 2008, 'Meaning in Organizational Communication: Why Metaphor is the Cake, not the Icing', *Management Communication Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 393–412.
- Hopfl, H. and Maddrell, J. 1996, 'Can you Resist a Dream? Evangelical Metaphors and the Appropriation of Emotion', in D. Grant and C. Oswick (eds), *Metaphor and Organizations*, SAGE, London, pp. 200–12.
- Jakobson, R. 1960, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, pp. 350–77.
- Kahneman, D. 2011, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

- Kim, W.C. and Mauborgne, R. 2005a, 'Blue Ocean Strategy: From Theory to Practice', *California Management Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 105–21.
- Kim, W.C. and Mauborgne, R. 2005b, *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*, Harvard University Press, Boston, MA.
- Kristeva, J. 1980, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980, *Metaphors we Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Latusek, D. and Vlaar, P.W. 2015, 'Exploring Managerial Talk through Metaphor: An Opportunity to Bridge Rigour and Relevance?', *Management Learning*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 211–32.
- Lundmark, E. and Westelius, A. 2014, 'Entrepreneurship as Elixir and Mutagen', *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 575–600.
- Marshak, R.J. 1996, 'Metaphors, Metaphoric Field and Organizational Change', in D. Grant and C. Oswick (eds), *Metaphor and Organizations*, SAGE, London, pp. 147–65.
- McCabe, D. 2016, "'Curiouser and curiouser!": Organizations as Wonderland – A Metaphorical Alternative to the Rational Model', *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 4, pp. 945–73.
- Merton, R.K. 1995, 'The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect', *Social Forces*, vol. 74, pp. 379–422.
- Morgan, G. 2006, *Images of Organization*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Morgan, G. 2016, 'Commentary: Beyond Morgan's Eight Metaphors', *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 4, pp. 1029–42.
- Nietzsche, F. 1873 [1990], 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', in P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg (eds), *The Rhetorical Tradition: Friedrich Nietzsche. Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, Bedford Books, Boston, MA, pp. 888–96.
- Örtenblad, A., Putnam, L.L. and Trehan, K. 2016, 'Beyond Morgan's Eight Metaphors: Adding to and Developing Organization Theory', *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 4, pp. 875–89.
- Ortony, A. 1975, 'Why Metaphors are Necessary and not just Nice', *Educational Theory*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 45–53.
- Oswick, C., Keenoy, T. and Grant, D. 2002, 'Note: Metaphor and Analogical Reasoning in Organization Theory: Beyond Orthodoxy', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 294–303.
- Oswick, C., Putnam, L. and Keenoy, T. 2004, 'Tropes, Discourse and Organizing', in D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L.L. Putnam (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, SAGE, London, pp. 105–27.
- Pablo, Z. and Hardy, C. 2009, 'Merging, Masquerading and Morphing: Metaphors and the World Wide Web', *Organization Studies*, vol. 30, no. 8, pp. 821–43.
- Palmer, I. and Dunford, R. 1996, 'Conflicting Uses of Metaphors: Reconceptualizing their Use in the Field of Organizational Change', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 691–717.

- Palmer, I., Akin, G. and Dunford, R. 2008, *Managing Organizational Change: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, Boston, MA.
- Rowe, P.G. 1987, *Design Thinking*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Sandberg, J. and Tsoukas, H. 2011, 'Grasping the Logic of Practice: Theorizing through Practical Rationality', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 36, p. 338.
- Schoeneborn, D., Vásquez, C. and Cornelissen, J. 2016, 'Imagining Organization through Metaphor and Metonymy: Unpacking the Process-Entity Paradox', *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 4, pp. 915–44.
- Schön, D.A. 1983, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York.
- Schön, D. 1993, 'Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-setting in Social Policy', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 137–63.
- Searle, J.R. 1979, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Shepherd, D.A. and Sutcliffe, K.M. 2011, 'Inductive Top-down Theorizing: A Source of New Theories of Organization', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 361–80.
- Sillince, J.A.A. 1999, 'The Role of Political Language Forms and Language Coherence in the Organizational Change Process', *Organization Studies*, vol. 20, pp. 485–518.
- Sillince, J.A.A. and Brown, A.D. 2009, 'Multiple Organizational Identities and Legitimacy: The Rhetoric of Police Websites', *Human Relations*, vol. 62, no. 12, pp. 1829–56.
- Smith, R.C. and Eisenberg, E.M. 1987, 'Conflict at Disneyland: A Root-metaphor Analysis', *Communications Monographs*, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 367–80.
- Strati, A. 2007, 'Sensible Knowledge and Practice-based Learning', *Management Learning*, vol. 38, pp. 61–77.
- Strati, A. 2010, 'Aesthetic Understanding of Work and Organizational Life: Approaches and Research Developments', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 4, pp. 880–93.
- Thomas, W.I. and Thomas, D.S. 1928, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*, Knopf, New York.
- Tsoukas, H. 1993, 'Analogical Reasoning and Knowledge Generation in Organization Theory', *Organization Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 323–46.
- Watzlawick, P., Jackson, D.D. and Bavelas, J.B. 1967, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, Norton, New York.
- Weick, K.E. 1989, 'Theory Construction as Disciplined Imagination', *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 14, pp. 516–31.
- Weick, K.E. 1998, 'Introductory essay—Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis', *Organization Science*, vol. 9, no. 5, pp. 543–55.
- Weick, K.E. and Roberts, K.H. 1993, 'Collective Mind in Organizations: Heedful Interrelating on Flight Decks', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 357–81.

Ybema, S. and Kamsteeg, F. 2009, 'Making the Familiar Strange: A Case for Disengaged Organizational Ethnography', in S. Ybema, D. Yanow, H. Wels and F. Kamsteeg (eds), *Organizational Ethnography. Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, SAGE, London, pp. 101–19.