Metaphors in Organization

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There are various conceptions and interpretations of what metaphors are in relation to organizations. Metaphors are, for example, said to arise (i) when meaning from a source domain is transferred to a target domain, (ii) when two domains are blended and a new meaning arises, or (iii) through cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system. A growing number of researchers and consultants are becoming interested in metaphors, as can be seen, for example, in the areas of organization theory, organizational communication, leadership and management, organizational development, and organizational behavior. Metaphors have been used intentionally both by theorists and researchers to analyze and study organizations, and by consultants and practitioners in the context of problem solving and organizational development. Additionally, metaphors play a crucial role in relation to the actual development of theories of organizations.

Understandings, theories, and conceptualizations of organizations are—and always have been—based on and influenced by metaphors. The term or concept "organization" is, in itself, a metaphor, etymologically derived from the ancient Greek word *organon* meaning tool. The concept of an organization is also linked to the biological understanding of the word, where the word "organ" refers to a part of a larger system, the body, in which the organ has a special function. Historically, military metaphors, organistic metaphors, and machine metaphors, in particular, have been widespread within organizations and organizational theory. There is a clear correlation between societal and scientific developments and the emergence of certain new metaphors in organizations. Old or existing organizational metaphors do not disappear, however, just because new metaphors arise. Rather, within organizations and organizational theories a wide range of metaphors coexist.

Deductive and inductive approaches are found within metaphor-based organizational research (Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008). The inductive approach is characterized by metaphors being elicited from the language use of organizational actors; the deductive by metaphors being projected onto and imposed on an organizational reality. Methodologically, one can distinguish between, on the one hand, discursive approaches, in which metaphors are contextualized, and the focus is on the locally specific uses and meanings of metaphors and, on the other hand, cognitive approaches, in which metaphors are viewed from a decontextualized perspective. In the latter case, the focus is on identifying metaphors across organizational actors and contexts.

One of the most influential theorists in relation to metaphors in organizations is Gareth Morgan, the author of *Images of Organization* (2006), which is considered to

be a major work in the field. Morgan describes eight different metaphors: organizations as machines, organizations as organisms, organizations as brains, organizations as cultures, organizations as political systems, organizations as psychic prisons, organizations as flux and transformation, and organizations as instruments of domination. Metaphors are not, according to Morgan, merely things that are used or arise within a theory. All theory is metaphor. Metaphors are a "*way of thinking* and a *way of seeing*" (p. 4). Metaphors offer a way of seeing—they stretch our imaginations and can create insights—but they are also always distorted and a way of *not* seeing. Irrespective of which theory or perspective we use to view (or construct) organizations or management, it will, according to Morgan, always be incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading. The idea is, therefore, that one should preferably make use of several different metaphors, as insights from one metaphor can help us to overcome the limitations of another (p. 342).

Theories of organizational metaphors often build upon the assumption that metaphors are about similarities, sameness, or likeness between domains: the source domain and the target domain. Morgan, for example, argues that metaphors arise from the implicit or explicit claim that A is (or is like) B. The degree of similarity between the two domains is crucial to the effectiveness of the metaphor. The similarity can be either too great or too small. Unless there is a certain degree of difference between the two domains, there will be nothing new in linking them. Conversely, if the difference is too great, the metaphor will be meaningless.

Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant (2002) argued that, within organizational theory, metaphors are complemented by tropes that focus on dissimilarity (anomaly, paradox, and irony), because these are more likely to be able to create generative, transformative, and frame-breaking insights when you are inside a cognitive discomfort zone. Metaphors, on the other hand, place us within a cognitive comfort zone and are therefore particularly valuable in the context of the incremental explication of knowledge in relation to existing theories, perspectives, and paradigms.

In his research, Cornelissen (2005) has proposed an alternative to understandings of metaphors in organizational theory, which operate on the basis of similarity/dissimilarity. Taking so-called interaction theory in metaphor research as his starting point, he has developed the Domains Interaction Model, which breaks with the idea that metaphors are about making a comparison between the source domain and the target domain, and identifying shared, preexisting features. The similarities that we find between the domains, in the form of characteristics or features possessed by both, are often not literally, but only metaphorically, shared, which means that the similarities did not exist prior to or independently of the metaphors. The metaphors often create the similarities. There are, according to Cornelissen, three elementary phases of metaphor comprehension in the Domains Interaction Model: (i) development of a generic structure, (ii) development and elaboration of the blend, and (iii) emergent meaning. When we are presented with or develop a new metaphor, we construct a correspondence between the source and target domains. The concepts and information in the domains are then transferred from both, and a coherent and blended image emerges. This new image is then linked and translated back to the

source and the target concepts, and the perception of these is altered. In particular, this causes the target subject to be viewed in a new way.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), metaphors are not merely linguistic phenomena. The ordinary conceptual system of human beings is largely metaphorical, which means that metaphors structure the way we perceive, think, and act. Metaphors are concepts we live by. As communication is based on the conceptual system, language reflects the underlying "primary metaphors." Within organizational research, systematic metaphor analysis (Andriessen & Gubbins, 2009) builds upon this conceptual metaphor theory. Systematic metaphor analysis is an inductive method which involves identifying the underlying primary metaphors that are in use in organizational texts. The purpose may be to identify the most common metaphors in a field, or to resolve debates about theoretical concepts in a field. Quantitatively counting the words and phrases relating to a metaphor can, according to this perspective, tell us something about the importance of a particular metaphor in a text.

Örtenblad (2017) has developed a typology of approaches to using metaphors in organizational analysis. The typology consists of six different ideal-typical approaches, which are themselves named with the aid of metaphors.

The *color map* approach involves a search for similarities between different metaphors and the organization under analysis. Each individual metaphor makes it possible to reveal a (specific) aspect or set of aspects, so using a variety of metaphors uncovers various aspects of an organization and the overall analysis is like a color map.

In the second approach, metaphors are perceived as *colored lenses*. The analyst selects a single metaphor through which all aspects of an organization are seen, understood, and described. Everything in the organization is perceived through the colored lens, and looked on as though it were the chosen metaphor. The metaphor itself is shaped and chosen, for instance, on the basis of the analyst's studies of the research literature. It is characteristic of this "seeing as" perspective to be more generative than descriptive.

Metaphors can also be used as *a set of pigeon-holes* into which the units of study can be placed when they have been categorized on the basis of the differences that arise in the analysis. The units of study can be organizations, subunits of organizations, or any phenomena or situations in people or organizations' understandings of the above, including verbal accounts and written texts. When examining people's understandings of organizations, the analyst typically tries to identify metaphorical or semimetaphorical expressions and metaphorical behavior, and categorizes the units of study in relation to these. Organizations as such are categorized on the basis of new or existing metaphors.

The fourth approach is the so-called *self-diagnosis approach*, in which members of the organization—at, for example, a workshop led or facilitated by the analyst—are prompted by the metaphors themselves to describe their organization, and how it ideally might be. The members are either entirely free to choose the metaphors or the analyst guides the process by deciding that the metaphors must be selected from within a particular source domain.

The *eye-opener approach* is primarily used in connection with organizational development. The point of departure is the metaphors produced by organization members—possibly provided or made visible through self-diagnosis. External or internal consultants, employees or managers, through alternative or contrasting metaphors, can then offer alternative realities which may enable organizational actors to solve specific problems or improve conditions within the organization (or part of it).

Metaphors can also be *cognitive innovations* that make it possible to understand and conceptualize organizations in entirely new ways. The analyst finds that the existing metaphors are insufficient to understand an organization or an organizational phenomenon, and therefore one or more new metaphors arise or are created. Which approach to using metaphors in organizational analysis is the most appropriate depends on the purpose of the analysis.

The use of metaphors in or in relation to organizations has been seen both as a positive and as a negative phenomenon (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Metaphors rate as positive, because they have been considered to be "liberating" in orientation. First, they provide the possibility of perceiving reality in a completely different and alternative way, which makes it clear that social reality is a construct that can be changed. Second, they can be used to understand or grasp something novel, such as the structure of the atom—in other words, to arrive at entirely new insights. Third, metaphors can be liberating in that their actual use has the character of experimentation. They can be used as tools in connection with diagnosing and solving organizational problems, as one sees, for example, in Organization Development. On the other hand, organizational metaphors have also been perceived negatively, as something that can constrain knowledge. One of the main criticisms claims that, as a result of their figurative character, metaphors are of no scientific value, in that they cannot live up to the scientific ideals of precision and falsifiability. The second main criticism of metaphors in relation to organizational theory is that some of them reify, act as ideological distortions, and create false consciousness. These include biological, organismic, or mechanical metaphors that make, for example, organizational structures and power relations appear natural, necessary, and immutable.

SEE ALSO: Management; Metaphors in Communication; Metaphors in Leadership and Leadership as Metaphor; Organizational Communication

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