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How to Do Things with Metaphor?

Introduction to the Issue

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Right on the first page of their *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that metaphors are not a matter merely of words, but of action.¹ The reason is that our conceptual system, which governs our thought and our everyday functioning, is made up of metaphorical concepts. In that sense, metaphors govern our lives. This metaphorical governance is quiet and inconspicuous and we are largely unaware of it, hidden as it is in our minds. *Metaphors We Live By* has served, perhaps more than any other publication on metaphor, to wake us up to the power of these invisible governors. The book showed how metaphors can be made visible by excavating metaphorical concepts such as “more is up” and “life is a journey” as underlying seemingly nonmetaphorical expressions in daily life.

From this starting point, Lakoff and Johnson elaborated their approach to metaphor in various ways. One direction focused on a deeper understanding of the human mind and its conceptual system and culminated in *Philosophy in the Flesh*.² Thought, this book states, is embodied, largely unconscious and largely metaphorical, and this unconscious metaphorical system functions as a “hidden hand” that shapes our everyday life. The origin of this hidden hand, to be found in our childhood sensorial experiences and their

1. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

2. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

neurological impact, is at the core of the book, as it digs below language into the bodily reality of our minds.

A second direction, taken by Lakoff in *Moral Politics* and smaller books derived from it, focuses on the way metaphors frame world-views and political common sense.³ This book claims that morality and politics are fundamentally framed by family metaphors, and that conservative and liberal thought in the United States can be understood by excavating their different underlying metaphorical views of the family. The book has given rise to heated debate on metaphors, framing, and politics—the so-called framing wars.

Whatever the direction taken, in Lakoff and Johnson's theory, metaphors do not color or embellish, as they are typically said to do when they are seen as poetic devices; nor do they mislead or lie, as they have been accused of doing by positivist thinkers in science and philosophy. Instead, they govern, shape, and frame. And they do so not only on the level of language, but also on the level of perception, conception, and affection.

The authors in this special issue are all inspired by this framing perspective on metaphor, and they aim to contribute to its further development. While the Lakovian paradigm claims that metaphors frame thought, language, and action, the action part seems to be relatively under-explored and under-theorized. We will focus on metaphorical action, which involves paying attention to the materiality of world-making rather than to the mind, to politics and ethics rather than to cognition and representation.

We travel more than one road. Our leading question—"How to do things with metaphor?"—is (at least) twofold. First, it pertains to a descriptive level: how metaphors do things in and with the world we live in. From this perspective, all articles can be said to follow the movements and mobilizations of specific metaphors in specific fields and domains. The fields addressed here are heterogeneous; they include nature and science (cloning, genomics, botany, geography, ecology), media and technology (scientific journals, newspapers, computer interfaces, painting, photography), and issues in politics and ethics (contested science, software literacy, research agendas, environmental degradation). But since the metaphors explored in the articles sometimes travel crisscross among several fields and issues, on their way rearranging and sometimes creating the fields as such, a categorization by fields can only be provisional: the metaphors ad-

3. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

dressed in the articles are continuously on the move. During these travels, their form and action may change. Metaphors in action may become weaker or stronger, get new interpretations, shift frames, clash or blend. And sometimes it is hard to tell whether these transformations are brought about by the metaphors themselves or by the metaphorical analysis employed by the authors. We might have to accept that they interact, that metaphorical analysis inherently implies a secret bond of transference between the researcher and the researched object.

This brings us to the second meaning of our question, pertaining to a self-reflexive meta-level: What can be done with the insight that metaphors do such things as framing, reframing, and transforming? It is not always a satisfactory endpoint to show how metaphorical framing occurs in different shapes, at different scales, in different domains, by different actors. The question what difference such analyses make cannot be ignored. What does the analysis imply for the issues and fields at stake—ethically, politically, ontologically, and epistemologically? Can and should they be reframed, for example?

This reflection also touches upon metaphor theory itself, as the question becomes how to frame the framing devices, the concepts by which we grasp metaphorical action. Since these concepts are typically metaphorical themselves, this leads to reflection on “metaphors of metaphor”: metaphors as they are at work in our understanding of metaphor, explicitly or implicitly. Fleshing out these “meta”-metaphors may offer new insights into what metaphors do—or are supposed to do.

In their introduction to *Metaphors of Globalization*, Markus Kornprobst and his co-editors explore such a metaphor-of-metaphor approach.⁴ They distinguish three main metaphors of metaphor, based on three perspectives of the relation between metaphor and reality. First, there is the idea that metaphors are *mirrors*. In this perspective, it is assumed that metaphors reflect, describe, and represent reality, more or less in correspondence, though perhaps selectively or distorted. Second, there is the perspective that metaphors are *magicians*: agents with world-making and enchanting capacities. Here it is assumed that metaphors are able to create, construct, and transform reality. And finally, metaphors can be *mutineers*, able to interrogate, resist, and deconstruct hegemonic discourses about what is taken to be reality.

4. Markus Kornprobst et al., “Introduction,” in *Metaphors of Globalization: Mirrors, Magicians and Mutinies*, ed. Markus Kornprobst et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). <http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/esc/knicolaidis/introduction.doc>.

Kornprobst and colleagues present these metaphors in an analytical triad, with gradations, overlap, and intertwining in between, an exercise resulting in a triangle in which metaphor theories (or specific case studies) can be positioned. Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual theory of metaphor could then be positioned somewhere between the mirror and the magician,⁵ while Lakoff's political framing analyses could be located more in the direction of mutiny. This positioning leads us to the further thought that the mirror and the magician represent different "ontological" views on metaphor, while mutiny refers to a more strategic way of employing metaphors. Mutineers may in fact think of metaphors as either mirrors or magicians, as Kornprobst and colleagues explicitly acknowledge. Mutineers' ontological views of metaphors will affect the goals of their attempted mutiny: a more truthful mirror in the one case, a world-transforming proposal in the other.

We find these metaphors inspirational for a first categorization of metaphors. Yet they do not exhaust the perspectives on metaphor, certainly not when it comes to metaphorical action. As, explicitly or implicitly, the articles in this issue will show, the potential actions of metaphors exceed the triad just sketched; metaphors can also bridge, mediate, manage, or distribute, and those actions cannot be reduced to the actions of mirrors, magicians, or mutineers. Let us turn to a brief introduction of the articles in this issue.

First, metaphors can be *bridges* between different domains, connecting and associating things previously separate, as Iina Hellsten points out in her article, "Popular Metaphors of Biosciences: Bridges over Time?" Her analysis of prevailing metaphors in debates on scientific innovations shows how metaphorical bridging occurs at several levels: metaphors not only bridge between what Lakoff and Johnson called the "source domain" and the "target domain" of the metaphor, at an individual cognitive level, they also bridge between different discourses (i.e., scientific discourse and popular discourse), different media systems (i.e., scholarly journals and newspapers), and different standpoints (i.e., advocates and critiques of specific developments).

Hellsten particularly concentrates on how metaphors may bridge between the past and the present by translating the unknown in terms of the familiar, and the new in terms of the old—sometimes

5. Although Kornprobst and colleagues position this theory within the magician—that is, the constitutive theory field—it may be argued that Lakoff and Johnson's notion of mapping between a source and a target domain, including its "mirroring" in the neurological system, tends toward a mirror theory as well.

the very old. The metaphor of horsepower in our contemporary cars is a case in point, but she focuses more particularly on the way scientific developments in cloning and genomics are communicated to a wider public. For example, Dolly—the first cloned sheep—was framed in terms of nineteenth-century assembly-line manufacturing of mass products, a terminology that enabled both advocacy (“perfect copies”) and criticism (“lousy copies”). Metaphorical images “lag behind” and may become so old that we have lost all direct familiarity with them. Hellsten tracks down different temporal cycles and paces in different discourses and media systems and thus reveals bridges across temporal gulfs that have not been explored before in metaphor research.

In the contribution of Marianne van den Boomen, “Interfacing by Iconic Metaphors,” in which she explores the role of metaphors in our daily use of software, metaphors function primarily as *mediators*. Mediators do more than create bridges; for them, making connections is foremost a matter of labor: negotiating, adjusting and aligning the sides to be connected. Mediators are usually called in when a settlement of incompatibilities is required, and mediators usually come with a price. In this case study, computer icons are considered as mediating metaphors between two fundamentally incompatible forms of code: digital code and cultural code—that is, between code that can only be read and executed by machines, and code that can only be read and acted upon by humans. Here, the mediators are also “transcoders,” translating one code or medium into another and vice versa.

In everyday computing, the profound ontological gap between machine code and human code is bridged, even clogged, by the graphical user interface, with its icons, windows, and menus. Van den Boomen analyzes these interface objects respectively as signs, tools, and metaphors, and shows how the settlement by mediating metaphors comes with a price: software and machinery become invisible and unknowable, locked up in a black box. The author argues that this is achieved by metaphorical reification and condensation, a process that not only represents but also actively hides (“depre-sents”) what is going on inside a computer. This particular iconic framing obscures the indexical operations set in action by software. The author aims to extend metaphorical analysis with an analysis of indexical sign-tools in order to grasp the hidden material mediations by software and its metaphors.

As stated previously, all authors in this issue consider metaphors primarily as framing devices. But while all metaphors are frames in that metaphorical sense, some are directly connected with literal

frames as well: *picture frames*. A picture frame cuts out or captures a visual representation, marks it with borders, and sets it aside as autonomous object. The framed representation can from then on lead a life of its own. While computer screens in the above case already showed something of this mechanism, the picture frame is the main meta-metaphor in the contribution of Chunglin Kwa. His article "Painting and Photographing Landscapes: Pictorial Conventions and Gestalts," tracks down the history of what we call "landscape" and reveals it as a visual metaphor, a concept that hangs ambiguously between a visual representation and a natural entity. Moreover, the gestalt of the natural entity changes when the medium of representation changes.

We may think that the natural landscape was there before we started to frame and capture it by painting and photography, but, in fact, the framing preceded the "content." The painterly genre of the landscape preceded the gestalt of a landscape in nature, and perhaps even produced it. Kwa shows that what we conceive as a landscape—be it holistic or fragmented—and what we perceive in a landscape is profoundly informed by the use of specific visual-representation technologies such as paintings, drawings, and photographs. Framing and technology together invoke the perception of specific "objects"—botanical details, ecological entities, cultural settlements, military targets—as well as the emergence of new scientific disciplines.

In Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of the origins of metaphorical thinking, metaphors *ground* our thought, which suggests that they are based on the earth, or even in it. This grounding is effectuated by our bodily experience as very young children and gives rise to primary metaphors that can later be combined into more complex and abstract ones. This analysis implies a pervasive directionality in the use of metaphors: metaphorical sources are relatively earthy and embodied, while metaphorical targets are relatively abstract and immaterial. In Michiel Korthals's contribution to this issue, this directionality is challenged: in his essay on metaphors connected with food, there is no constraint on direction. Food appears as a source as well as a target of metaphor, and when it is a target, the source may be further removed from the earth (i.e., the body) than the target—for example, when cheese is framed as a gift from a monumental tradition.

Food as a metaphorical target is the main issue in his essay. When different "food cultures" are distinguished along conceptual lines inspired by Mary Douglas, the metaphors associated with the respective cultures turn out to be very heterogeneous. Some have their

source in traditional cultural images, such as famous buildings or biblical symbols, while others are embodied: the body may appear as a machine to be fuelled, or as a synesthetic organism. Korthals argues that the cultures are not separated strictly, and neither are the metaphors statically representative of the different cultures; on the contrary, the metaphors play dynamic roles, especially in economical and political strategies. In Korthals's analysis, food metaphors are typically situated in highly competitive contexts in which they seduce and attract, distinguishing styles and cultures, and distributing the various types of respect in those cultures. This finally emerges as their primary role in this essay: metaphors are *distributors* of power, prestige, and respect.

The normative importance of plurality is a main theme of the last two essays. Jozef Keulartz and Cor van der Weele argue that what is at stake in the debates on conservation biology is the management of nature; metaphors, accordingly, are *managers*. Starting from the framing of conservation biology through the metaphor of "invasive aliens," the essay observes how the perennial tendency to order conceptual fields by dichotomies has led to a stalemate. Dominant social metaphors constructed the field of "conservation biology" as "invasion biology," which in turn led to a polar dichotomy between a nativism that cherishes cultural distinction and isolation on the one hand, and a cosmopolitanism that values cultural openness and blending on the other.

The essay continues by showing that the dualism can be decomposed by considering relations between frameworks and practice. Rigid conceptualizing does not live up to the practical challenges of nature management: traditional frameworks evolve, and new frameworks are introduced. Metaphors of performance, of clockworks, of hybridization, and of health all do different things to invasive species; their place and meaning can only be understood when we look at the practices in which they are put to work. A multiple and evolving vision on invasive species emerges, and an awareness of these multiple perspectives is what the authors recommend from a pragmatic point of view.

In her essay titled "Moral Agendas for Genomics: How to Find the Blind Spots?," Cor van der Weele focuses on the agenda-setting role of metaphors. By framing agendas, metaphors are acting as *chairpersons* who, at least at first sight, are in control: they determine what is to be on the agenda. Van der Weele argues that while moral agendas for genomics have been receiving some critical evaluation in recent years, the really challenging part is to identify what is *missing* from such agendas. She argues that competing agendas provide help: a

global agenda can point to important blind spots in the (alternative) ELSI⁶ agenda, and vice versa. This is why the essay argues for plurality; we should not delegate all the power to one chairperson. Yet the essay also argues that a global moral agenda deserves more priority: many urgent global discrepancies suffer from moral neglect in the ELSI agenda.

Throughout these essays it becomes clear that we, by our joint interest in metaphorical action, concur with the action part of Lakoff and Johnson's program. In order to account for this action, the metaphor of framing can be specified in greater detail; or perhaps it is better to say that it can be complemented, since it is not so self-evident that bridging or managing are always specifications of framing. To begin with, framing may have to be taken surprisingly literally in those cases in which a picture frame establishes a metaphor, as happened when painted landscapes became metaphors for how we experience natural scenery. But in cases where framing is a metaphor for the action of metaphors, other action words may in fact be more to the point; for example, building bridges over time, mediating between cultural and digital codes, distributing prestige and respect, managing nature conservation, or setting moral agendas. Even such a small set of meta-metaphors gives an idea of the enormous amount of words that are available in principle to describe the action of metaphor.

The actions we describe tend to be world-making, so in a way all these contributions underscore the capacity of metaphors to be, in the terminology of Kornprobst and colleagues, magicians. But here again, the metaphor of the magician can be specified further, and again it may be better to say that it is complemented rather than specified by the meta-metaphors here presented, because it is not so clear that mediation, distribution, or agenda-setting are specifications of magic actions. In fact, the contributors to this special issue agree that in some senses, metaphors are definitely not magicians; we don't think that they enchant and remake the world purely through their magic powers, without any further effort. On the contrary, we think that metaphorical power can only be understood in connection with the materiality of the world and with the hard work it may take to bridge, frame, mediate, chair, manage, or distribute.

We distinguished two levels in the meta-metaphors of Kornprobst and colleagues: mirrors and magicians are metaphors about the rela-

6. ELSI: ethical, legal, and social implications.

tion of metaphors to the world, while the mutiny metaphor refers to strategic intentions. We also distinguished two levels in our own action-oriented question, "How to do things with metaphor?": the first level describes metaphors as bridges, mediators, frames, and so on, while at the second level, we wonder what can be done with the insights that metaphors bridge, manage, frame, set agendas, and so on. Some of the essays in this issue are explicitly strategic and normative; they want to influence and change how metaphors play their moral and political roles in the world. Could these normative intentions be described as plans for mutiny? Well, again, "mutiny" is just one among many available strategic words to describe what can be done with metaphorical insights on metaphor. The two articles, the first by Keulartz and Van der Weele and the second by Van der Weele, are more interested in cooperation than in mutiny: both deal with multiple and competing metaphors and argue, in different ways, that a consciously cooperative use of a plurality of competitive or even belligerent metaphors might enhance the quality of practical decisions.

In other contributions, normative strategies are more implicit. For example, Hellsten's article does not explicitly advocate the use of more innovative metaphors than horsepower or frontier experiences, but the suggestion that there are purposes for which newer images are more helpful is certainly there. Korthals's normativity is also implicit, but his article might indeed be viewed as an invitation for metaphorical mutiny, addressed to those who, because of their food styles, end up with less than average shares of success and respect.

The remaining two articles are not concerned with rearranging or reformulating the strategic use of metaphors, but with ways of looking at them. Van den Boomen encourages us to follow the good old strategy of taking metaphors literally, wondering where in fact the mailman is who delivers the mail in our computer mailbox and how he succeeds in doing his job. Following this strategy will quickly cure us of the idea that metaphors are disconnected from the real world, and force us see that, in some cases at least, we had better take their causal powers very seriously. In Kwa's article, metaphor as a framing device is closely connected and works together with other framing devices—in particular, the artistically and technologically mediated ways we look at the world. Through the close association of metaphor with mediated perception, his approach foregrounds the materiality of metaphor in yet another way.

Overarching these different strategies, finally, is our wondering where the road of making reflections on metaphor completely metaphorical might lead us. In our limited travels so far, we seem to be

developing a view in which metaphors tend to be mixtures of magicians and laborers, enchanting and hardworking at the same time. Should we view them as conjurers then? Since we focus on what metaphors do, perhaps in the end we should not worry too much on what they are. In order to emphasize metaphorical action, verbs deserve more attention than nouns.