

METAPHORS MATTER

Some food for thought

Metaphors Matter

Why do metaphors matter? Because we use them all the time, whether we are aware of it or not.

Unless we are thinking and talking about a purely physical reality – an apple is an apple – we frequently turn to metaphor to help us make sense of things and to help us comprehend and communicate.

We compare one thing to another to help us better understand complex processes and metaphysical concepts.

We cannot adequately describe feelings and sensations without metaphor.¹ E.g., *She's the apple of my eye*.

Metaphors are not merely linguistic constructions; they pervade our thoughts and actions.²

When we use metaphor, we are trying to figure things out and to express to others how we think the world works.³

Metaphors are so deeply rooted in our collective consciousness they are central to the development of human thought and reasoning.⁴

Because reality is mediated by language, the metaphors we use shape our mental models and, thus, shape the way we perceive the world.

Metaphors and how we use them shape the way we see ourselves and the way we see others.

Without metaphor “...many truths would be inexpressible and unknowable.” –James Grant

Metaphors matter because their power is both profound and subtle.

War metaphors, which predominate in sports, business and politics, are one obvious example of the way we use metaphors and the way the metaphors we use influence our thinking and actions.

Consciously and subconsciously, when we use war metaphors, we perceive our actions and interactions with others as a battle. Using war metaphors can cause us to feel and behave like warriors, or war victims, even in the absence of an actual conflict or threat.



Target customer. Corporate war room. Marketing campaign. Siege mentality. Navigating a minefield. In the trenches. Take no prisoners. Kill the competition. Sales bootcamp. Product battlefield. Military-grade. Sales blitz. Frontline workers. Trade war. Army of consultants. Shot across the bow. Shot down his argument.

1) Grant, James. (2014). *Why Metaphors Matter*. OUPblog: Oxford University Press.

2) Foss, Sonja K. (1988). *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

3) Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

4) Ibid.

Visual Metaphors

Visual metaphors are pictorial direct comparisons – mental or graphical – between one thing and another thing that serve to enhance or transfer understanding.

Just as spoken and written language mediates the way we perceive reality, visual metaphors and how we use them influence our thinking, behaviors, attitudes and actions.

The term metaphor comes from the Greek roots “*meta*,” carrying over, and “*phoros*,” light. The word combination itself is a metaphor that implies the illumination of an unfamiliar concept.

In that sense, visual metaphors transport meaning through comparative or associative imagery. The comparison can be physical, conceptual or both.

As with all metaphors, the interpretation of a particular visual metaphor will vary from person to person based on preexisting assumptions or connotations associated with the image by the individual or group.

A metaphor with a preexisting meaning can be a double-edged sword.

Applied inappropriately or without awareness, visual metaphors can misdirect or mislead. They can impede our ability to clearly understand a situation or each other.

Visual metaphors “...shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.” –George Lakoff

Visual metaphors are deeply entwined in the mental and emotional connections by which we communicate and collaborate.

- They assist creativity, invention, inspiration, decision-making and problem-solving by forming comparisons and juxtapositions.
- They help us make sense of what is happening around us in terms of our own motivations, goals, actions, and perceptions.
- They let us explore what we have yet to discover or understand about a situation, system or process.
- They help us find deeper meaning by shedding new light on old ideas and assumptions.



Broken candles were carved on this ancient tombstone as a visual metaphor for the end of life.

Seeing the Big Picture



Visual metaphors are omnipresent. We use them consciously and consistently in areas such as art, advertising and education to persuade and explain.

Our everyday conversation is filled with visual metaphors. Even when we are using words and not looking at pictures, we see symbolic and connotative images in our minds that evoke ideas and feelings.

Like all metaphors, visual metaphors vary in use and meaning in different eras and in different cultures. Also, like all metaphors, visual metaphors can become outdated and stale, losing their original intent.

Machine metaphors, for example, came into prominent and pervasive usage during the Industrial Age.

We began to refer to people as cogs in the system. We started projects by flipping the switch or pulling the lever.

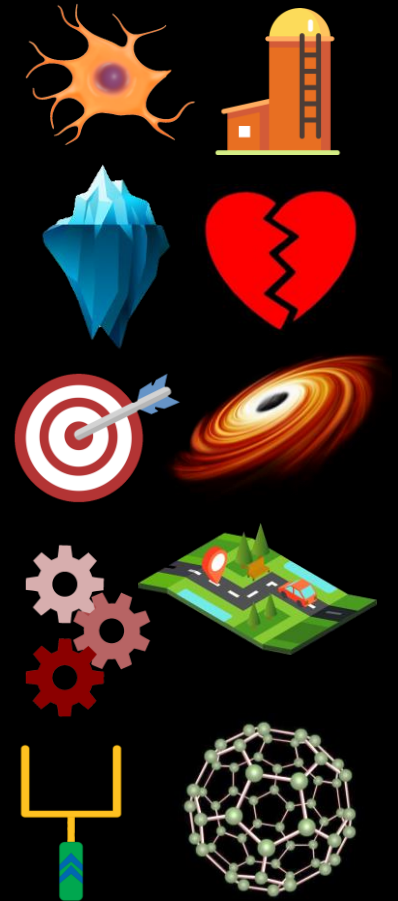
Even our bodies became machines with hearts that are engines, circulatory systems that are plumbing and nervous systems that are electrical grids.

During the 20th century we started describing our brains as computers and memory as hard drives. Sometimes, we feel the need to reboot our lives.

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” –William Shakespeare



- **BIOLOGICAL:** Nerve center. Brains of the operation. Late bloomer. Broken heart. Branching out. Family tree.
- **MECHANICAL:** Big wheel. Economic engine. Grease the skids. Slipped a cog. Siloization. Life is a rollercoaster.
- **GEOLOGICAL:** Mountain of paperwork. Up a creek. Rock solid. Tip of the iceberg. Heart of stone.
- **GEOGRAPHICAL:** Roadmap to success. No man is an island. At a crossroads. Data highway. Moral compass.
- **CLIMATOLOGICAL:** Snowball effect. On thin ice. In a fog. Eye of the hurricane. Blue sky. Raining cats and dogs.
- **COSMOLOGICAL:** Financial black hole. Shoot for the moon. Out of this world. Stars in their eyes.
- **MILITARISTIC:** Outflanking the competition. Setting your sights. Given marching orders. Right on target.
- **ATHLETIC:** Game plan. Going the distance. Crossing the goal line. Punting. Pivoting. Hitting the bull's eye.
- **SPHERICAL:** Well-rounded. On a roll. Bouncing back. In good shape. In bad shape. Sphere of influence.





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