Reflections on metaphor and the nature of mind: A synthesizing overview of the role of metaphor in generating the imagination, the unconscious, language, consciousness, and culture

Ethan H. Buchman

Recommended by Professor Dan Meegan,
Department of Psychology, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, University of Guelph
Prepared for Professor Marcel Danesi, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto

Experience is not given to us; it is constructed. As we develop in a particular culture, our minds establish a framework of reality by which we are able to make judgments about the world and discern its nature. Each culture develops a slightly different framework, and tends to see the world in slightly different ways. We often lose sight of this fact, finding ourselves hypnotized by our own mental constructions and technologies. It is through the power of metaphor that we become ensnared in illusory conceptions of reality. But it is also through this same power that we may free ourselves from these bonds.

The field of psychology is in great need of a unifying framework by which the various theories and models of mind might be synthesized and understood in relation to one another. In light of this, I present a narrative that weaves together such aspects of the psyche as the imagination, the unconscious, meaning, and consciousness through their shared basis in that most formidable of operations, metaphor.

Our story begins with a process I have termed *dynamic semiosis* (henceforth, *dS*), which I take to be the psychological counterpart for (or component of) the rapid encephalization that took place in the nervous tissue of the individuals that evolved into *Homo sapiens*. This process involves, first of all, the re-presentation of sensory and affective experiences as context-free neurological units, or *iconic signs*, whose presence generates an abstract level of neurological activity removed from direct action or experience – the imagination. But furthermore, *dS* involves the development of connections and associations among *iconic signs*, thereby generating maps of meaning and value.

It is the innate ability to perform *dS* that results in the Jungian phenomena of archetypes and a collective unconscious. Archetypes are not the symbolic re-presentations that show up in dreams or can be drawn and documented; they are, rather, the basic (genetic) instincts and physiological urges of the Human species which, by virtue of *dS*, become empowered to “manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic imagery” [1]. Thus, *dS* permits the manifestations of a collective

unconscious, the symbolic re-presentations of Humanity’s shared biological predispositions, the archetypes.

The key ingredient to all this talk about signs, symbols and semiosis is necessarily metaphor. Metaphors generate *iconic signs* by allowing a neurological structure to re-present some aspect of experience. But more importantly, metaphor can extend the valence of an *iconic sign* by relating it to other signs through experiential co-occurrence. For example, the *iconic sign* re-presenting the physical feeling of ‘warmth’ will be coupled to that re-presenting the subjective feeling of ‘affection’ by virtue of their co-activation in early experiences such as that of being held warmly and affectionately in one’s mother’s arms. In this way, the metaphor **affection is warmth** is formed, and the *iconic sign* for ‘warmth’ takes on the valence of ‘affection’ and vice-versa, thereby extending the meaning and emotional schemata of both re-presentations. This metaphor may then come to underlie more complex metaphors, such as those that describe *warm people* or even *hot women*.

Thus, by the action of metaphor, a system of meaning is established through connections among *iconic signs* and their emotional correspondences. Since all Humans share some aspects of experience, there will be a collection of metaphors that transcend cultural boundaries – these have been labeled by Grady as *primary metaphors* [2], and their purpose is to provide a basic meaning-structure for the new domain of abstract neurological activity (the imagination). However, in any particular group of Humans, these primary metaphors may take on relative importance with regards to specific

contexts, and come to organize themselves into diverse cultural frames, thereby establishing a hierarchy of meaning - a morality - for that group.

But there is a second process that interacts with *dS* to complete the generation of culture. This process, which I shall call *dynamic activiosis* (*dA*), is the behavioural or motor counterpart to the sensory-based *dS*. *Dynamic activiosis* is active among many animals (whereas we presume that *dS* occurs only in Humans) and allows for the abstraction of imitated behaviour (into *iconic activity*), which, as Peterson demonstrates [3], gives rise to the phenomenon of *play*. It is the interaction between these two dynamic processes that produces *ritual* (= *symbolic play*). The process of ritualizing play, of integrating *dA* and *dS*, generates culture.

Perhaps the most remarkable product of culture is language. Language was generated by the metaphorical associations between the *iconic activities* of the vocal apparatus (the motor-requirements), *iconic signs* representing vocalizations (the sounds), and *iconic signs* for other experiences (the referents) through processes such as *sound symbolism* [4] and *onomatopoeia*. This framework of associations thus produced the vocal-auditory-meaning complex we call language.

Once a lexical system stabilized, words were able to remove themselves from direct *sound symbolic* and *onomatopoeial* referents to stand for the more abstract products of *dS*, the extensive interconnected arrays of *iconic signs*. The attachment of a word to an *iconic sign* constituted an attachment as well to all the associations of that sign, thus generating concepts - "the pairing of images and sound words" [5]. As the conceptual system developed, it stabilized itself by deploying syntax to organize concepts into a structured method of thinking about reality. It is this method, which varies from culture to culture on the basis of environmental and historical experiences, that gives rise to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis - that "language shapes thought."

Refuters of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis reject "language shapes thought" on the basis that there can be thought without language - the underlying principle of *Universal Grammar* and what Pinker calls *mentalese* [6]. There is certainly truth to this, as we have seen with *dS*, a thinking process that can operate without language. However, the misunderstanding comes from ambiguity in the term 'thought.' "Language shapes thought" refers to a type of thinking that is concerned with cultural stability and continuity, a budding extension of the deeper thought-patterns of a less constrained iconic imagination. It is to say that members of a particular culture are predisposed to direct attention to or to concern themselves with specific aspects and structures of their reality, as determined by cultural relevance - and this directing of attention is embedded in their language [4].

But this is not to say - and this is really where the misunderstanding arises [6] - that a member of one culture

may not understand the concepts of another. The universality of our imaginative faculty, coupled with metaphor, will likely permit any individual to understand any concept. But it is unlikely that a culture will employ a concept that its historical experience has not necessitated. For example, there is no stable, motivating concept of "a camel that will not give milk until its nostrils have been tickled" in English, as there is in Farsi, the word *nakhur* [4]. Thus, English-speakers are less likely to use such a concept in structuring their framework of reality, whereas Persians are more likely to, since such camels exist and are relevant to their culture and their goals. But English-speakers can nevertheless express and understand the concept (though, necessarily, with more words).^a

Language's role in structuring reality seems to be largely derived from its application to, and extension of, the more primitive reality structuring inherent in ritual. Once rituals can be described, their significance can be projected onto other features of the universe, thereby generating narrative and myth. Myth is a metaphorical framework that embodies, in image, the meaning (=implication for action) of a culture's shared experiences [3], serving to allow for a conceptual understanding of those experiences and an appropriate structuring of reality. Metaphor is thus an instrument for providing coherence among our experiences, and for defining what is real [2]. In more direct terms, understanding *is* metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated quite admirably how strongly any framework of reality must be based on metaphorical assumptions, which we learn through our experiences in a culture as we grow up [2]. A phenomenal example is the **time is money** metaphor - a contemporary mythology about time - which allows us (better yet, forces us) to think of time as a resource, something that can be wasted, usefully spent, cherished, etc. In turn, this conceptualizing of time has a drastic impact on the nature of our lives, leaving us constantly concerned with whether or not we have used our time appropriately. Not all cultures possess such a metaphor for (=concept of) time.

The workings of metaphorically generated conceptual systems, to use Lakoff and Johnson's terminology, result from *mappings* between a source and target domain (i.e. money and time, respectively). The attributes of the source domain (money can be spent, saved up, wasted) are mapped onto the target domain, generating an understanding of the target through the applied associations of the source (time can be spent, saved up, wasted). Metaphorical conceptual systems are stabilized by similarities between source and target that can be exploited by mapping; interestingly, these similarities are often metaphorically based as well. The similarity between time and money that allows for coherent mapping is the **time is a substance** metaphor, which creates for time the potential to express the properties of other physical (and metaphorical) substances, including money (which has both physical and metaphorical properties). In

this way, an entire referential system is built up by which we understand one aspect of experience in terms of another (or even multiple others)^b.

Many of the concepts we utilize refer to dimensions of experience that are difficult to describe, because they do not operate in the same three-dimensional space that our bodies operate in. The space of our visuo-kinesthetic bodily experience is easily differentiated and quantified, easily known. But how is one to differentiate the various features inherent in an emotion? What are the edges, momentums, and spectral frequencies of *love*? It would be quite impossible to discuss love without an operating metaphor, something like **Love is a Journey**, **Love is a Force**, or any of a multitude of others used to understand and discuss experiences of love. These metaphors give love a shape, a structure familiar to our bodies, allowing us to interact with it in rich new ways and to describe those interactions with greater clarity.

Consider again our notorious **time is money** metaphor. Time is certainly not *actually* money. Nor, for all we know, is it *actually* a substance. You do not *own* any amount of time, it is not something you can *give*, and you certainly cannot bring it to the bank and cash it in for gold. It is quite apparent that there *is* time, but to discuss it at all as a concept unto itself requires that a conceptual metaphor be utilized, that the concept be provided with structure so that its relationship with other words and its interaction with the body may be precisely understood.

A study of the underlying metaphors used by particular cultures may yield insight into how different cultures value the various dimensions of their experience, and to how those valuations can evolve and change through history. **Time is money** is particularly a metaphor of the West, and its spread to other cultures has come as a result of the interference of Western nations. Or consider the **Argument is War** metaphor, which structures our conception of arguments on our conception of war, and has us winning, losing, defending and attacking positions, retreating, surrendering, etc. [2]. How might social interaction be improved if we had an **Argument is a Collaborative Piece of Art** metaphor operating to structure our experience of arguments instead?

Lakoff and Johnson have labeled such metaphors that allow for coherent structuring of our experiences *conceptual metaphors*. Conceptual metaphors are generated by experiential co-occurrence (e.g. **affection is warmth**) and by metaphorical similarity (e.g. **time is money = money is a substance + time is a substance**). These metaphors structure our social and emotional experiences in terms of our more concrete physical experiences. Our entire understanding of reality is a metaphorical extrapolation of the biological experiences of our bodies in their environment; we are *embodied minds*.

Let us take a step back now to evaluate where we are. We have seen how the potential for *dS* gives rise to a collective unconscious. But the process and products of *dS*

in an individual constitutes a personal unconscious, “our capacity for the implicit storage of information about the nature and valence of things” [3]. It is our entire memory system – all knowledge and re-presentation of our experiences and potentials. And it is forever active upon itself, to arrange and rearrange its contents, generating a bubbling narrative (which may not be linear - consider dreams) that exists even *without* language. So where and how is it that consciousness arises out of this vast unconscious thought-scape?

The basis of all conscious thought is the **mental activity is physical behaviour** metaphor, which necessarily implies that **imagination is reality**.^c These metaphors outline a certain structure for unconscious thought about mental activity: to act in the real world requires an actor (a Physical I), so to ‘act’ in the imaginative world there must be an ‘actor’ as well: the Analog ‘I’ [7]. Analog is defined as an entity that is “at every point generated by the thing it is an analog of” [7]. Thus, the Analog ‘I’ is an abstract duplicate of our behaving selves; by the action of metaphor, it takes on all the features and potentials of the Physical I. The Analog ‘I’ is a tool used by the unconscious for extending its exploration and understanding of reality by ‘doing’ in mental space the things it might do in real space.

And so, in the name of narratization, the unconscious deploys language (and linearity) to explore how entire experiences occurred, how they might have occurred, how they might occur next time, and what they mean about their various participants (including the self). All of this babbling is really the first instance of linguistic analysis, and it is a high-level analysis of experience for the purpose of updating conceptions of reality, of self, and of other. And when it is understood (on the grounds of metaphor) to be the babbling of the Analog ‘I’, we understand the Analog ‘I’ (by more extensive metaphor) to be the self, and this is the grand performance we may call consciousness.

But the entire thing is based on language – more accurately, a particular type of analysis and structuring that language makes possible. And the conceptual metaphor **I am my Analog ‘I’**, expressed and accepted consistently in language and culture, has as its repercussions an entire societal system based on egos. An ego is an elaborate image of the Analog ‘I’, which we identify as re-presenting, or in the most severe cases (which are quite common), as *being us*. This is an incredibly dangerous assumption, and its implications are still being sorted out. One of its primary effects is the division of personality into two conflicting halves: a rational ego that should control an animal body. Consider the all-too-common expression: “control yourself!” But who is supposed to be controlling whom? This fragmentation of the psyche, studied extensively by Jung, can quite often result in deep psychological issues, even neurosis [1]. But to bring us back on track, and away from the terribly uncomfortable talk of our illusory egos and their senselessness, consciousness’ grounding in language arouses

the question, “what about mind-space; does it too depend on language?”

That is a complicated issue, for all activity of the imagination implies a certain kind of mind-space, and I have been quite careful to differentiate the activity of the imagination from that of consciousness.^d But the mind-space of consciousness is a specific extension of the mind-space of the imagination, one that, as Julian Jaynes states, is “intimately bound up with volition and decision” [7]. It is the mind-space associated with the action of the Analog ‘I’, the mind-space that contains what we consider to be *ourselves*.

It is an important discovery to realize that pre-classical civilizations attributed everything in their existences - including their own works and mind-spaces - to the activity of the gods. As Jaynes demonstrates, it was not until what he calls the *bicameral mind* broke down that man took responsibility for himself, and subsequently took credit for his own works and mind-space [7]. Such a historical transition gave rise to the philosophical explosions of Greece, India, China, and ultimately the entire world. It was Humanity’s response to the newly posed question of “who am I that conducts all this physical and mental activity?” It was an internalization of the concept of agency, for the personal unconscious does not perceive its imaginings to be produced by itself, but rather by other symbolic agents – mostly, the gods. But consciousness succumbs to the metaphor **I am my Analog ‘I’**. Its mind-space is the space of that Analog ‘I,’ the space that you feel yourself to control, or in a certain sense, *to be*.

It is the great trick of Zen and other Eastern philosophical disciplines to extend the mind-space of the self to include more of the environment, beginning first with the unconscious, and eventually incorporating the entire universe. It is by way of metaphor and certain experiences that these extensions are made. A liberated man is one whose entire psyche operates on the conceptual metaphor **I am the universe**, or, as the Upanishads put it, *tat tvam asi* - “Thou art That” [8]. These philosophies and practices have at their core a method for transcending the structures and limits set up by our cultures, a method that utilizes the full potential of our cognitive faculty, that is, of *dynamic semiosis* and all its elaborations, to attain an unattainable bliss. But it is always a difficult discipline, for language is phenomenally enchanting.

We have seen how metaphor gives rise to our imaginative faculty and structures it into a personal unconscious. It is the tool that has allowed the Human species to blossom cognitively like no other. But metaphor is also responsible for our naivety, our persistent belief in the validity and truth of our own creations. It is the force that

assembles the grand illusions of consciousness upon which we base our incomplete conceptions of self. But it is furthermore the tool that can free us from our own bonds.

ENDNOTES

^a We find a similar phenomenon with regards to color terms. While all Humans can perceive the same colors, their respective cultures have not necessitated that they readily differentiate among them on a day-to-day basis. Thus, some cultures have only three main color terms (white, black, and red), while others, like English, have many more.

^b The full derivation of **Time is Money** involves a complex cultural psychology, based ultimately on the primary metaphor **An Activity is a Substance**. See Lakoff and Johnson ([1980]2003) 65-68

^c This is a particularly powerful conceptual metaphor; its implications amount to an overwhelming *enchantment* cast by cultural values and linguistic structures.

^d The mind-space of the imagination seems to be the cue for the general use of the term consciousness, and is perhaps responsible for why most people’s use of consciousness includes far more mental activity than does Jaynes’.

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