



# Metaphors can kill

## TEACHING THE TRUTH ABOUT METAPHORS

Although metaphors have long been used as powerful tools for persuasion, school materials often still portray them as aesthetic devices that are mainly used to embellish and vary language. However, this is a simplified approach that may have serious consequences.

**Aline Alves-Wold**, PhD research fellow at the Norwegian Reading Centre, University of Stavanger

### Understanding metaphors: traditional vs. contemporary view

In traditional literature, metaphors are seen as “instances of novel poetic language”, a figure of speech pertaining solely to the linguistic sphere (Lakoff, 1993, p. 202). Classical philosophers, such as John Locke, even argued that metaphors were a *semantic twisting of words* that confused thinking and that should be completely avoided in all discourses that aimed to inform or instruct (McGowan, 1982, p. 239). Following this traditional view, everyday language would then be expected to contain no metaphor, or at least they would be rarely found.

However, in their famous work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that metaphors are commonly found not only in everyday language, but also in *thought* and *action*. In this new approach, a metaphor is rather seen as a *cognitive tool* that allows us to understand a concept in terms of another. For example, when we commonly use the concrete concept of ‘money’ to *understand* the abstract concept of ‘time’, as in ‘I don’t have time to *waste*’.

Nevertheless, even though almost half a century has passed since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s seminal work on metaphors, many school materials still present metaphors as aesthetic devices that are mainly used to embellish and vary language. However, as I will argue in this text, this is a simplified approach that may have serious consequences.

### Tricking our brains: processing common metaphors as literal language

An important characteristic of contemporary views on metaphor is that the *concrete* concepts used for understanding abstract ones are not chosen randomly, but usually fall into patterns (Goatly, 2007, p. 15). For instance, by commonly using concrete concepts like ‘battles’ to conceptualize *abstract* concepts like ‘arguments’ (e.g. He never *wins* an argument), patterns like ARGUMENT IS A BATTLE start to emerge.

Curiously, when metaphorical expressions are used many times, they become conventionalized and may ultimately enter the lexicon. Thereby, many may not perceive them as metaphors anymore. For example, common expressions like ‘*wasting* time’ and ‘*winning* an argument’ may not be perceived as metaphors due to their frequent use. In fact, novel-metaphors like ‘students are *snowflakes*’ and conventionalized metaphors like ‘I want to *spend* time with you’ are processed differently by the brain. According to Goatly (2007, p. 22), novel metaphors “show more right-hemisphere brain activity in fMRI brain scans”, whereas common metaphors and literal language are processed with less effort. Goatly (2007, p. 22) then warns that the “relative ease with which conventional metaphors and literal language are processed suggests the possibility for considerable latent ideological effects”.

This is where the danger begins. That is, when metaphors are used not only as a tool to understand concepts, but also to persuade others of one’s own – sometimes

limited or even twisted – understanding of these concepts for ideological purposes. In addition, as common metaphors are processed by the brain similarly to literal language, however vague and disconnected from reality these metaphors might be, they still can be interpreted by the brain as logical arguments, which might increase their persuasive effect.

But how can metaphors be used to convey twisted ideologies? To explore this further, we first need to understand the concept of *framing*.

### Framing: Metaphors to highlight and to hide

Although metaphors help us understand and explain new concepts based on concepts that we already know, this linking between one concept and the other can only map some aspects of the former to the latter; otherwise, there would not be a metaphorical link between concepts, but rather a literal one, where concept A would literally be concept B. This partial mapping, as remarked by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 10), allows us to *highlight* specific aspects of a concept and *hide* others; a practice that is commonly known as *framing*. That is, through partial mappings between concepts one can deliberately frame specific issues according to his or her own perspectives. For instance, by framing ‘immigration’ as an ‘endless stream’ or ‘immigrants as a threat’ (Bredahl, 2018), one may focus on the negative aspects of immigration, and downplay the beneficial aspects of it.



Framing is therefore a very powerful tool for persuasion, and, consequently, for the communication of ideology, because it allows one to frame his or her own world view in a way that *emphasizes its positive aspects* and *de-emphasizes the negative ones*. In fact, Charteris-Black (2014, p. 211) points out that metaphors can be an effective tool for the creation of an “*Us vs Them*” image. For instance, the author argues that by using metaphors like WE ARE A FORCE FOR GOOD and THEY A FORCE FOR EVIL or WE ARE VICTIMS and THEY ARE THREATS, one contributes to the creation of such a contrasting portrayal between *Us* and *Them*.

### Creating polarized views: Systematic use of contrasting metaphors

Given the efficacy that framing has for ideological purposes, this practice is commonly used by politicians to persuade voters, as discussed in Alves-Wold (2017). However, it is important to note that ideological persuasion is not only reserved to the political sphere; it is also a very common practice among friends and family, and dangerously widespread in social media. For example, when seemingly innocent memes of ‘girls as dolls’ and ‘scientists as monsters’ are shared in social media, individuals are not only sharing vague metaphors, they are contributing to the creation of a dangerous narrative about how others should be seen and to the spread of twisted ideologies that often lead to polarized views of the world.

In fact, according to Charteris-Black (2014, p. 211), the choice of specific metaphors

for different topics is motivated by ideology and by using metaphors in a *systematic way*, one can form “long-term mental representations” that reinforce one’s view of the world. It is therefore possible to go as far as to argue that metaphors are, in fact, *inherently ideological*. That is, it is the individual’s choice of metaphorical mappings that are communicated to others, which, in turn, may influence how the latter perceives the world.

For instance, in 2015, pictures of 3-year-old Syrian Alan Kurdi lying lifeless on a Turkish beach, after his family’s unsuccessful attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, sparked a heated debate on immigration and on an imminent refugee crisis. Whereas some Norwegian politicians addressed these issues by alluding to a Messianic

view where immigrants at risk were portrayed as *victims* that should be *saved* and *protected* (Lunde, 2016; KRF, n.d.), others approached immigration from a defensive perspective claiming that immigration *threatens* not only national values, but also security (Furuly & Handen, 2017; Rønning, 2015). The metaphors used by the politicians to address these issues map very different aspects of the concept of immigration and lead to contrasting views on immigrants, namely IMMIGRANTS ARE VICTIMS vs. IMMIGRANTS ARE THREATS. In addition, these metaphors evoke very different types of emotions, such as *empathy* and *fear*, and this type of emotional appeal is indeed very powerful and commonly used for persuasion purposes.



### The danger of unconscious emotional associations

The reason why metaphors are so relevant for persuasion is that they work at a subliminal level and can “exploit both conscious beliefs and *unconscious* emotional associations” (Semino, 2008, p. 86). Since metaphors are unconsciously linked to emotions such as anger, fear, and happiness, they can influence people’s perspectives towards different topics and lead to their consent to, for instance, controversial political actions (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 22).

In a thought-provoking discussion of the use of metaphors in discourses related to the Gulf-War, Lakoff (2009) argues that specific metaphors were used to justify the war, and he goes as far as to claim that “metaphors can kill” (2009, p. 5). According to him, metaphors such as ‘Saddam is Hitler’, ‘the occupation of Kuwait is an ongoing *rape*’ and ‘the US is in the Gulf to *protect freedom, protect our future, and protect the innocent*’ contribute to the creation of a

myth that portrays the US and its leaders as ‘heroes’, at the same time that it frames Iraq and Saddam Hussain as ‘villains’ (Lakoff, 2009, p. 5). Such a narrative evokes feelings of fear in citizens, and when influenced by fear, one may make decisions that one would not have made, had the element of fear not been there.

In conclusion, we can therefore say that given the versatility and effectiveness of metaphors and framing in communicating ideologies, they can have dangerous consequences, if used for manipulation. Thus, in an era where lies can be called ‘alternative facts’ and be spread worldwide by the media in just seconds, it is our responsibility as teachers to help our students become aware of the many facets of metaphors, and, especially, of the power that they have to appeal to our emotions and influence our decisions. For this purpose, teachers can for instance use the suggested activity below to help raise their student’s awareness.

### Increasing students’ awareness of the persuasive power of metaphors

Simple activities can be used in the classroom to convey a broader picture of how metaphors are used and how they can influence our perspectives. The activity below, for example, can be used to start a discussion on the use of metaphors, or as a complementary activity when working with specific topics for debates, such as the ones mentioned in step 1.

1. Choose a topic, such as immigration, welfare systems, vaccines, marriage, or any topic of relevance for your class;
2. In small groups, students should search for media news, tweets, memes, political speeches, or other appropriate channels that are addressing the chosen topic;
3. Ask students to identify the types of metaphors that are being used to conceptualize these topics (they might find surprising to see how often metaphors are used);

- What concepts are being used to map these topics? Can they find contrasting concepts to address the same topic? For example, are ‘vaccines’ portrayed in terms of both ‘remedies’ and ‘poisons’?
- What types of associations (e.g. positive vs. negative) and emotions (e.g. fear, relief, sadness, happiness, etc.) do these metaphors evoke?
- Who are using the different types of metaphors? For instance, are journalists, scientists, tweeters and youth using divergent types of metaphors? For what purposes?
- How can these metaphors influence our opinions and decisions?



4. Additionally, students can also look at the distinction between novel and conventional metaphors.

- As mentioned above, literature suggests that conventional metaphors are more commonly used for persuasion, since they are processed by the brain in a similar way to literal language. However, novel metaphors can also have effective implications for persuasion. That is, when met with a novel metaphor, the listener/reader will need a longer time to process it, which consequently draws the listener/reader's attention to the topic being discussed (for more examples, see Alves-Wold, 2017, p. 79).
- Can students find both novel and conventional metaphors addressing the chosen topics?
- Which type is used more often?
- Are there any patterns distinguishing when novel and conventional metaphors are used? For example, are they used in relation to specific genres or for specific purposes?

5. Results can be shared among student groups through debates, posters, videos, or digital presentations.

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