

Metaphor Awareness and Skills: Learning A Few Good Metaphors

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Abstract

This paper discusses in general how metaphors are basic to human thought, and in particular the paper documents metaphors occurring with high frequency in mediation and negotiation dialog. The author argues that if a mediator were skilled with just these few metaphor domains, he or she would find frequent opportunity to apply that skill to better facilitate the mediation process. A three-level curriculum is outlined for mediators to become "metaphor-aware."

Introduction

Does the best mediation occur when the mediator is particularly insightful about what participants are really saying? In mediation, as in life, people talk and we wonder, "What do they actually *mean*?" "Meaning" has multiple facets. When one facet promotes conflict, another may help conciliate. We know that what people say is only an outward indication of their true experience or what they actually mean. More of the true meaning may remain hidden than revealed and it can be the mediator's job to bring more of it to light.

People are not machines. Except in specialized domains or in describing the "what", "where" and "when" of specific cases, words do not have a one-to-one correspondence to objects and actions in the "real" world. Note that when describing "how" or "why," words inevitably become multi-faceted to convey "many-to-many" relationships with the real world. Concepts, metaphors and conceptual metaphors are what put these many-to-many relationships in a readily usable form.

The human mind works by compressing many-to-many relationships into simpler form. For example, we can think about things that do not exist or never happened by combining a generic thought of their presence with a specific instance where they are absent, expressing the result as "this paper has no value." Or, we think of a conflict by combining the generic idea of a blockage or barrier with the specific instance of interacting with another person, expressing the result as "I'm talking to a brick wall."

In turn the linguistic characterization of the blended and compressed ideas will now have influence of its own. Language summarizes the blended result and a shaping or convergence process is set in motion that influences what is "meant" over time. The nature of this process is becoming better understood after twenty-five years of concerted

effort in the cognitive sciences, and many researchers conclude that metaphor is basic to human thought (see discussions by Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2002).

So potent are they that metaphors are likely to be found invaluable by mediators to better understand what disputants really mean. Metaphor helps us notice how two very different ideas blend, and that the experience of one thing can influence how we understand something from an entirely different realm of experience. You may reflect, for example, on how you decided to come to this conference or to choose to attend this presentation.

You may have figured out the *worth or value* to you of each possible choice; the italicized words help us identify the metaphor: DECISION MAKING IS (metaphorically understood as) ECONOMIC ACCOUNTING.

You may have *weighed* the different choices: DECISION MAKING IS (metaphorically understood as) MEASURING PHYSICAL PROPERTIES.

You may have considered your long-term goals to see if this choice helped *move you along your path* to reach certain goals: DECISION MAKING IS A JOURNEY.

But maybe you were already here and, to *conserve energy*, you just stayed where you were: DECISION MAKING IS THERMODYNAMICS.

Some people make these decisions without such reflection, just saying yes to what *rings a bell, sounds good, or feels right*: DECISION MAKING IS SENSORY PERCEPTION.

These kinds of metaphors are ubiquitous and can be found throughout negotiation and mediation dialog. The metaphor-aware mediator would have ready knowledge of all the structural details pertaining to these metaphors, knowing such things as the following:

Not only that Accounting involves writing down amounts and adding them up, but also the balancing of amounts; when someone says "...that doesn't add up..." or "...the bottom line for me was...", if you are aware of the accounting metaphor, you know that the lines just above the bottom can be crucial, and you may ask, "If that's what you gain, what did it cost?"

Not only that Journeys involve moving on a path, but finding the right path in the first place and the possible involvement of maps, vehicles, baggage, etc.; when someone says "...this moves us forward...", a query that metaphor-awareness might generate is, "Tell me more about the map you're following."

Not only that Sensory Perception involves immediate sensation but also sensitization and habituation; so when someone says "...it just felt right..." you might be able to provoke new thinking by asking about previous experiences that heightened receptivity to this stimulus, or masked another one.

Which Metaphors Should We Learn?

These examples draw on Accounting, Journey, and Sense Perception metaphors. If you are interested in familiarizing yourself with the metaphors most likely to come up in mediations or negotiations, are these the most important? What are the metaphors that, if you were to make yourself more fully aware of them, would be likely to benefit you the most?

Metaphors are sometimes discussed in the conflict resolution literature: A dispute has been metaphorically understood as a *Battle*, a *Sport or Game*, and dispute resolution as *Cooking, Commerce*, or sometimes even *Dancing and Gardening* (Cohen, 2003). Wilmot

and Hocker (2001) discuss sixteen common metaphors that negotiators use to approach conflict or to form a perspective: *War, Struggle, Explosions, Court Trial, Force of Nature, Animal Behavior, Messiness, Communications Breakdown, Games, Heroic Adventure, Balancing, Bargaining, a Tide, a Garden, a Dance, or as Quilt-Making*. Gelfand and McCusker (2001) cite some of these and add *Theatre/Cinema*. Haynes (1999) discusses *War, Competitive Games, and Journey* metaphors. Coleman (in press), distinguishes five metaphoric frames for understanding conflict: *Games of Strategy, Social Psychology of Human Relations, Disease and Pathology, Subjectively Constructed Meaning, and Complex Systems*.

Many of the same metaphors just mentioned as having been identified in the conflict resolution literature have also been studied and described in detail by cognitive scientists studying a wide variety of other spoken and written discourse (including Deignan, 1995; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Eubanks, 2000; Kövecses, 2002; Charteris-Black, 2004): *Games and Sports, Health and Illness, Food and Cooking, War and Conflict, Animals, Plants and Gardening, Light and Dark, Building and Construction, the Parts and Functions of the Human Body, Journeys, and Complex Machines*. In this literature such metaphors are termed “conceptual metaphors” to signify their connection to cognitive processes.

In my own research (Smith, 2005b, that involved family, business, personal injury, and labor relations conflicts) I have studied a subset of these conceptual metaphors that are both widely documented in cognitive science and also named by specialists in conflict resolution: (1) War/Fighting/Struggle, (2) Animals/Animal Behavior, (3) Games/Sports, (4) Journeys, (5) Construction and (6) Plants And Gardening. The most frequently found metaphor domain was by far that of the Journey, followed by that of Construction, and then War/Conflict/Force/Struggle and Games/Sports. The Conceptual Metaphor domain of Plants/Gardening yielded only minimal instances and Animals/Animal behavior none at all. These results with some examples of specific metaphors found are summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1
Selected Examples of Specific Metaphors

Conceptual Metaphor	
Journey	NEGOTIATING IS FORWARD MOVEMENT REASONING IS FOLLOWING POINTS ALONG A BOUNDED PATH DISAGREEMENT IS DISTANCE FROM A LOCATION BUSINESS/WORK IS FORWARD MOVEMENT BUSINESS IS STAYING ON THE ACCEPTED PATH A PROBLEM IS A LOCATION ON A JOURNEY
Building/ Construction	NEGOTIATION IS A CONSTRUCTION (ON FOUNDATION) AN AGREEMENT IS A CONSTRUCTION; AGREEMENT IS PRE- QUALIFIED, (VERTICAL) FORMATTED LANGUAGE BUSINESS IS A CONSTRUCTION; BUSINESS ARRANGEMENTS ARE PARTS CONNECTED IN PHYSICAL FORM

Game/Sports	BUSINESS IS A GAME; RUNNING A BUSINESS IS PLAYING A GAME/ CHOOSING THE GAME TO PLAY WORKING IS PLAYING A GAME NEGOTIATING IS A GAME; NEGOTIATING IS BEING A PLAYER IN THE GAME
War/Conflict/ Struggle	NEGOTIATION IS A TEST NEGOTIATING IS ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES BUSINESS IS COMPETITION FOR SCARCE RESOURCES BUSINESS IS STRUGGLE
Plants/ Gardening	BUSINESS IS A PLANT; INCREASING BUSINESS IS GROWING PLANT BUSINESS CYCLES ARE SEASONAL CHANGES
Animals/Animal Behavior	(none found)

I found such metaphors spontaneously used by negotiators in every three or four comments throughout their dialogs. And these are just a small subset of the metaphors that could be looked for. So these results strongly suggest that if a mediator were skilled with just a few metaphor domains, he or she would find frequent opportunity to apply that skill.

Implications for Training Mediators

The four or five metaphor domains just discussed can be considered as a starting point in educating mediators about metaphors. Each of these metaphors can be described in terms of a lexicon or list of key words that indicate that a metaphor is present. Then mediators can practice distinguishing instances when these words are used metaphorically to allude to two domains simultaneously, versus when they are used literally and apply to only one domain. Mediators should discuss and become familiar with how meanings shift when metaphors are invoked – looking for unstated assumptions, rhetorical direction and generalized evaluations that the metaphors imply.

Finally mediators can participate in role-plays that allow them to join, extend or elaborate metaphors already operating in ways that offer to improve interpersonal connections, build trust and rapport, highlight certain issues, maintain coherence while including relevant complexity, and support cooperation.

Follow-on training could explore which metaphors are complementary, have desirable features not present in the metaphors currently being used and may combine most easily to flesh out meaning, reveal additional openings for mutual gain, and to shift attention, emphasis or evaluation. We want mediators to learn which metaphors offer markedly different structure and direction compared to those most often used (see Smith, 2005a, b, and c for more detail).

In conclusion, three levels of mediator education regarding metaphor can be envisioned and are outlined in Table 2, below.

Table 2
Metaphor Awareness and Skills
A Proposed Curriculum of Three Courses:

Beginners

Become Sensitive to Metaphors Widely-Used in Negotiations

Some Major Metaphor Domains

Journey
Construction
Games/Sports
Struggle

The lexicons of each.

Applying to three key negotiation functions: (1) careful listening, (2) enhancing communications among participants, and (3) expanding options for resolution.

Intermediate

Discover and Enjoy The Anatomy of Metaphor

Metaphor Structure (target-source domains; conceptual vs. specific; correspondence mappings);

Detecting metaphors in participants' thinking, practice identifying incongruent language.

How to join, extend or elaborate metaphors already operating in ways that offer...

- to improve interpersonal connections,
- build trust and rapport, support cooperation,
- highlight certain issues,
- maintain coherence while including relevant complexity.

Advanced

Choreograph With Metaphors

When to guess underlying metaphors, when to let them evolve.

The domains that work well together, or that produce a shift; inference mappings; unstated assumptions; generalized evaluation; rhetorical direction.

Learn which metaphors are complementary, or have markedly different structure or direction.

Which may combine most easily to flesh out meaning, which reveal additional openings for mutual gain, or shift attention, emphasis or evaluation?

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