Why think about Metaphors and Models?

An early definition of metaphor is offered by Aristotle in "Poetics" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E):

"Metaphor is the application of an alien name".

When we think of or talk about metaphors most of us think of them as poetic or rhetorical devices. For example, the words spoken by Romeo when he sees the candlelight in Juliet's bedroom:

"But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!"

(Romeo and Juliet, William Shakespeare)

Susan Sontag (1978) famously identified the potentially pernicious nature of some of the metaphors present in our language, and in our culture. She opens "Illness as Metaphor" with this richly metaphorical passage:

"Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."

In itself, this would be sufficient justification to spend some time considering the way metaphors can enrich communication, and offer deeper meaning than can be found in "everyday language". However, over the course of the last century, a more fundamental role than linguistic 'ornament' has been described for metaphor.

In a series of lectures between 1906 and 1911, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure began to explore the complex of relationships he perceived to be present in the interaction between 'sign' and 'signified' – word and meaning (Saussure, 1986). Rather than understanding words as tools to express or reflect our experience, Saussure suggested that the role of words might be more fundamental, actually determining the meaning of experience and substance, defining an otherwise random continuum of ideas and images. According to Saussure's definition, it is language itself which forms coherent thought and understanding.

Sigmund Freud suggested that the determining force of certain less literal aspects of language usage (slips of the tongue, jokes and metaphors) should be understood as originating in the dynamic and instinctual sub-stratum of the psyche he called the 'unconscious'. Rather than defining cognition, Freud found in language a potential insight to his patient's individual unconscious self: '*the metaphor can be regarded as the symptom which reveals the repressed desire*' (Jefferson, et al., 1982).

Lacan, a follower of Freud working in the middle of the 20th century, combined the ideas of Freud with those of Saussure, suggesting that language actively works upon the '*primordial unconscious state*' in the individual, the '*infinite plane of jumbled ideas*' which makes itself known through every word spoken (Jefferson, et al., 1982). Our language is borne of a 'state of organic need', creating a structure through which we are able to formalise the 'shapeless mass' of experience (Lemaire, 1977).

Looking at the symbolic function of language, Suzanne K. Langer suggests that 'symbol making' is as primary a process to human kind as eating: '*..it is the fundamental process of the mind, and goes on all the time*' (Hayakawa, 1990). She describes our perceptual experience in terms of this symbolic image making, suggesting that symbols are drawn from experience which is then abstracted and worked into '*a metaphorical fantasy, a figurative meaning*' (Ortony, 1979).

Max Black illustrates the effect of the metaphoric paradigm with the analogy of a game of chess:

'Suppose I am set the task of describing a battle in words drawn from a game of chess. The enforced choice of the chess vocabulary… filters and selects, it brings forward aspects of the battle that might not be seen at all through another medium' (Ortony, 1979) (p.19)

If we at some fundamental level perceive our lives as a journey – perhaps as a roller-coaster ride, perhaps as a steep climb – the language we choose to describe our everyday events will be transformed by this perception.

Developing this concept, psychotherapist Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar suggests that in observing ourselves through the metaphor, we are choosing to engage in an act of creation: the metaphoric paradigm not only defines, but limits, filters and constructs our existence: 'Through understanding existence we create it, and are created by this very process' (Ben-Shahar, 1999). As Suzanne K Langer suggests, 'the origin of metaphorical thinking is not in language, but in the nature of perception itself, in abstract seeing' (Ortony, 1979). Freud's concept of the individual 'unconscious ego' as made visible through an understanding of the metaphor or dream image, is replaced by the theory that it is the speaker's mental construct which lies behind the metaphoric utterance. According to Carl Rogers, this construct, the self-concept or map we make of ourselves, is determined 'not so much by our actual powers and limitations, as by what we believe to be our powers and limitations.'

The contemporary work of George Lakoff suggests that we should understand metaphors in terms of a 'conceptual mapping system'. The theories developed by Lakoff together with Mark Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, Lakoff, 1987, Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) are based on empirical linguistic research, and propose that examination of our language, and especially the metaphors we use, can provide an insight into the *conceptual systems* that govern our lives.

Conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous. It is barely possible to complete a sentence without using them. An example used by Lakoff and Johnson to introduce the idea that concepts

work metaphorically, and that these concepts also provide a framework for our actions, is that of ARGUMENT. The relevant metaphorical concept here they describe as RATIONAL ARGUMENT IS WAR, which they found to be reflected in many common expressions, for example:

Your claims are *indefensible*

I've never *won* an argument with him

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

The words are literal, not poetic or flamboyant – but the metaphor is not only in the words. We happen to use these words to talk about argument, because we *think* of argument in that way. To quote from "Metaphors we live by":

"It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground."

There is not actually a war going on when we engage in argument or debate, but Lakoff and Johnson propose that our responses during that activity are governed by the sense that it is a battle. In modern Western culture, when two people argue their range of possible actions is limited by this metaphorical concept, and it is in this sense that we could be said to "live by" metaphor.

It is easier to appreciate the importance of this if we imagine what it would be like if we didn't have this conceptual metaphor, or if we had a different one. To quote from "Metaphors we live by" again:

"Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently."

George Lakoff has developed a website (Lakoff, 1994) on which he lists the conceptual metaphors that he has observed, and it is a rich resource. He uses the format "A is B" where A is the source and B is the target – such as "Darkness is a solid substance". Examples of this latter metaphorical concept (taken from the website) are:

"We had to feel our way through the darkness"

"Darkness pressed in on all sides"

A recent example of the way that metaphorical concepts frame our thinking and our actions is found in Naomi Klein's "Shock Doctrine" (Klein, 2007). Metaphors are used throughout

the book to make links between economic policy and political, military and social actions. One of the examples she uses is in relation to torture. She describes the process of "coercive

interrogation" and quotes from a CIA manual: "There is an interval – which may be extremely brief – of suspended animation, a kind of psychological shock or paralysis. It is caused by a traumatic or sub-traumatic experience which explodes, as it were, the world that is familiar to the subject as well as his image of himself within that world. Experienced interrogators recognise this effect when it appears and know that at this moment the source is far more open to suggestion, far likelier to comply, than he was just before he experienced the shock." Klein proposes that the same process goes on at the level of a whole nation-state when economic "shock therapy" is employed – such as happened after September 11th 2001 in the USA, or following the recent war in Iraq.

So how does this inform our work with patients?

There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing.

John Berger (1972)

'*Language bridges the gap between I and Thou. It is the ultimate flow'*

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

Our choice of language and the particular way we choose to tell our tale offers our listener insight into the perception we have of our individual reality.

In telling our story, we present an act of interpretation and creation involving an evaluation of our past experience. The ontological or personal properties we assign metaphorically to certain aspects of our history often only surface in the immediacy of the telling (e.g. 'the illness knocked me for six..').

The therapeutic consultation therefore constitutes an interactive space in which the patient's story may be fashioned, and it is in the process of the interaction itself that the narrative is created. This narrative is therefore both individual to the patient, and formed in the interaction between the therapist and patient.

If we emphasise the role of language in this interaction, we see that the interpreting 'structure' of the therapist inevitably plays a significant role in the development of the narrative itself, the resonance of shared symbolic understanding determining the clarity with which the therapist perceives the patient's condition.

If the narrative created between the therapist and the patient is successful, the telling of the story itself will have therapeutic potential: 'our states of tension become tolerable as we manage to state what is wrong, to get it said…' (Hayakawa, 1990). The interactive healing process which comes about in the creation of the narrative between therapist and patient is

often described in terms of realisation: a creation of shared understanding. Ben-Shahar describes the psychotherapeutic paradigm as 'the art of change': the creation of a new inner language which enables the patient to 're-create themselves towards less limited, less limiting a world' (Ben-Shahar, 1999).

Helman (1984) gave a detailed description of the social and cultural factors that contribute to perceptions of health and illness and consequently influence help-seeking behaviours. Although he did not describe these in terms of conceptual metaphors, it is easy to see how his empirical evidence (mostly anthropological) adds weight to the theories proposed by Lakoff and Johnson and others. An understanding of metaphor may therefore be as important for health care workers as an understanding of patient health beliefs (Skelton, et al., 2002). An empirical demonstration of the difference between conceptual metaphors used by GPs and patients (Skelton, et al., 2002) showed that:

- GPs tended to use far more metaphors to do with machines than did their patients.
- GPs tended to conceptualise their role as problem-solvers and "controllers of illness".
- GPs tended to de-personalise, and make emotionally neutral the colourful, personal and emotionally-charged stories brought by their patients.

Recognising the power of conceptual metaphors in governing the ways in which we act in the world leads us to a respect for the particular words we, and our patients use.

And what about teaching and learning?

There have been many attempts to understand the process of adult learning, and a number of these have become very familiar (Rogers, 1969, Knowles, 1984, Kolb, 1984, Brookfield, 1986). There is an emphasis on participation, autonomy, perception of relevance and a constructivist epistemology. These models contrast with the older models of learning which described the process as "transmission of knowledge" and the "delivery" of learning. The metaphors which conceptualise teaching and learning are revealed in the language, and have a powerful effect on both teacher and learner.

There is much to be gained from examining our own conceptual systems, and those of our learners. The particular words and phrases we all use can give us insights into the conceptual frameworks operating. Rather like understanding "learning style" (Honey and Mumford, 1982), an understanding of metaphor may become an essential skill for facilitators of learning.

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