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Activating metaphors: Exploring the embodied nature of metaphorical mapping in
political discourse

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Activating Metaphors: Exploring the Embodied Nature of Metaphorical Mapping in Political Discourse

Courses: persuasion, rhetoric, communication theory, metaphor theory, multi-modal communication

Objectives: this activity allows students to explore the embodied nature of metaphor and its interpretative significance by using gesture and physical movement. Students also understand how in metaphor, abstract entities are conceptualized in terms of something more concrete.

Introduction and Rationale

In this unit activity, I explore how students can make use of the principles of embodied cognition and meaning, and specifically the embodied nature of metaphor to explore political discourse and communication. Work in cognitive linguistics has highlighted the fact that humans construct a view of reality that is informed by our species-specific capacities and limitations, and our interaction with the social and physical world (Tyler, 2012). In these terms, language itself can be viewed as derived from conceptualizations that are based on physical and sensory images (Holme, 2012). Together these comprise a theory of embodied cognition that can be utilised in an educational context (Giovanelli 2014).

Metaphor is generally understood as the process of understanding one thing in terms of another. Research has long shown that metaphor is more than a literary trope, and is commonly used in everyday discourses and conversation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor presents the phenomenon as a process of mapping certain attributes from a source domain to a target domain. Source domains tend to be those aspects of experience that are directly encountered in the physical world, and so metaphor can be considered to have a strong experiential basis

(Gibbs, 1999). For example, in a very common metaphor in western society, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, knowledge and experience of a journey are used to give structure and meaning to the more abstract concept of life. Here, attributes such as movement along a path, start and end points and elements of decision-making about which direction to take are mapped from the source domain *journey* to the target domain *life*, and are linguistically realised in expressions such as “My career was heading in the right direction,” “our relationship had ended” and “I came to a crossroads in my life.”

In conversation, a striking example of the embodied nature of metaphor occurs when speakers explicitly activate metaphors (Müller, 2008; Müller & Tag, 2010) using supporting gestures that make visible the connection between the source and target domains. For example, a speaker might specifically draw attention to the metaphor inherent in “My career was heading in the right direction” by moving her hands in a forwards motion away from her body so as to indicate progress being made along a physical path. In this instance the metaphor and its mapping structure are both multimodal (occurring verbally and gesturally) and foregrounded (the fact that it is multimodal draws attention to it in a way that suggests importance). The gesture itself is both based on and highlights the physical basis of the metaphor, which is used by speakers in interaction to provide a richer sense of meaning for their co-participants than would be possible than simply using a verbal metaphor.

Because metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon, it provides a frame (Lakoff, 2004) for thinking about and viewing the world. Frames may be idiosyncratic, or collective and more deeply embedded within specific cultures as “Discourses” (Gee, 2012, p.2). Indeed, what has become known as Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) has proved to be fertile ground for exploring the world-views embedded in and promoted by political discourse occurring in various types of persuasive texts

(Charteris-Black, 2013; Jeffries, 2010; Lakoff, 2004, 2009). From an educator's perspective, Higgins (2005) argues for the importance of teaching students explicitly about metaphor to encourage critical reflection. Higgins outlines how and why the ability to be aware of one's own conceptual system and the ubiquitous process of metaphorical mapping are crucial if teachers want students to be able to understand the nature of thought, the power of frames in promoting and constraining world-views in a range of text and discourse types, and the role of language as a representational meaning-making resource.

However, a perennial problem for the teacher working with concepts from linguistics in the classroom can be the lack of an explicit and facilitative pedagogy (Bell 2015). In what follows I suggest an approach to the teaching of metaphor utilising movement, gesture, role-play, and drawing on the human capacity for gestural metaphor activation to reconfigure conceptual space into physical space. The goal of this activity is to provide a genuinely enabling way for students to explore the embodied nature of metaphorical meaning, exploiting the potential of the human body to draw attention to the ways in which metaphor operates.

The Activity

This activity is designed with high school junior or senior students in mind, although it can be adapted to work with younger or older learners. It begins with some exploration of the concept of metaphor before building into tasks that ask students to critically examine the embodied nature of a specific example of political discourse.

Students are initially asked to bring in a text (it is important not to use the words "poem" or "literature") that makes use of metaphor. A number of students will probably bring in some literary material, and this can provide the stimulus and motivation for some initial discussion based on why they believe that metaphor is

exclusively a literary phenomenon. Texts that are non-literary can be explored to exemplify how wide-ranging metaphor actually is. At this stage, having a working definition of metaphor in straightforward terms such as “describing one thing in terms of another” would also be useful.

The next stage of the activity encourages students to explore the physical basis of metaphor and to understand the process of source to target domain mapping. Any metaphor appropriate to the class can be used to support this. As an example, the following line from sports journalism can be used to exemplify how metaphor operates.

Move ahead of their rivals in the race for his signature

There are two metaphors here: the transfer of a player understood both in terms of a straightforward PATH metaphor and in terms of a BATTLE with rivals competing against each other. Using this example, students can explain how the concepts of “battle” and “race” help readers to understand the text and make sense of its meaning.

The best way to do this is to exploit the physical basis of metaphor (and of language) by setting up activities that promote the use of movement and critical spatial awareness in the classroom. Students can be told that metaphor is structured around the concept of cross-domain mapping, and that in this instance the abstract notion of a transfer is described by using two other domains, a race and a battle. Both of these domains have identifiable characteristics that are mapped across from the source domain to help us understand the target domain. Students can then explore how these mappings might work both in this particular example and within sports journalism more generally. To do this, the students should present the metaphors in a physical format using aspects of freeze frames or role play, for example by using their bodies to emphasise two interested teams moving along a track from a start to a finish

line, or two teams physically fighting by locking arms and pushing each other, or the different strategies that the teams might use to reach their desired goal. In doing so, they are thinking critically about how source to target domain mapping is necessarily selective (not all aspects of a race are used to structure an understanding of the transfer), and are drawing attention to the bodily basis of metaphor. At this stage, they can also experiment with changing metaphors: why for example do certain types of texts and registers draw on particular source domains? They could use the following list of common source domain, taken from Kövecses (2002), to think about typicality and what this suggests about how things are framed: the human body; animals; plants; buildings and constructions; machines and tools; cooking and food; heat and cold; light and darkness; movement and direction (p. 16-25).

With this grounding in metaphor, students can now explore political discourse with a view to undertaking some critical analysis. This can be in any format; the example below is from a speech given by Barack Obama, which is readily available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/16/remarks-president-campaign-event-0>

...Around this time four years ago - or three years ago, we were losing 800,000 jobs a month. The banking system had completely locked up. The auto industry was on the verge of collapse. The world economy was hemorrhaging. And three years later, we've now created close to 4 million jobs. The banking system is healthy again. Credit is flowing; small businesses are starting to get back on their feet. Manufacturing is as strong as it's been in a couple of decades in terms of job growth. We still have enormous challenges, but we've made extraordinary progress. (Obama, 2012, para. 11)

There are a number of metaphors in this text.

PROGRESS IS A PATH

THE ECONOMY IS AN OBJECT

THE ECONOMY IS A PERSON

MOVEMENT IS GOOD, STASIS IS BAD

Students can draw on their previous work in exploring these mappings. In addition, they can experiment with various ways of activating- and thus foregrounding- the mapping through gestures, which in turn makes the metaphor multi-modal. The gestures that student use can be explored to provide a fine-tuned analysis of precisely how a particular metaphor is used to structure and promote a version of reality. They should be pushed to critically examine the extent to which these metaphors uphold a political ideology, and to consider how politicians from different political parties might use similar or dissimilar types of metaphor. The students could also take one metaphor and produce a short news clip exploiting the source to target domain mapping in more detail, for example an interview with a health professional who had helped businesses to recover or had looked after a now healthy banking system. And, they can invent their own novel ways of presenting the same target domain using other source domains. At all times, they should be encouraged to critically reflect on the bodily basis of meaning and the motivation for imposing a certain way of viewing things.

Debriefing

Following this work, students can find other examples of political discourse, undertake similar activities and then present their ideas to the rest of the class in the form of an oral presentation. The presentation should explore the following questions.

- What types of source to target domain mapping exist. Are there patterns in the kinds of metaphors that the chosen text utilises?
- How are the producers of political discourse drawing on the bodily basis of metaphor and meaning?
- How does the political discourse provide a frame for viewing the world? What ideologies does it promote and present?

Instructors can extend these activities into other forms of persuasive writing. For example, students could explore the language of journalism in more detail, across different types of reporting. Since many advertisements rely on visuals, students might consider how images are used metaphorically in this genre to support verbal metaphor; in reading and activating metaphors using their own gestures, they could examine the interplay of various modes in creating meaning. Finally, the discussion could be brought back to the initial starting point by thinking about how literary texts make use of metaphor. Do they do so in different ways? Do they have more or fewer metaphors? Do they rely on a richer exploration of a single structuring metaphor? This could support classroom discussion of the very notion of literariness.

Appraisal

This activity offers students a way of understanding the embodied nature of meaning and the complex yet fascinating process of cross-domain mapping. It provides a way into exploring the pervasiveness of many metaphors in political discourse and offers a critical analytical apparatus for students to consider how metaphors may frame the versions of reality that are presented to us. Just as importantly, the emphasis on gesture and movement encourages total participation and allows students to make use of a powerful semiotic resource (their bodies) in developing responses to and exploring texts. As I have mentioned, the activity can be

adapted to suit the needs of learners of all ages; I have used this activity with twelve year olds up to postgraduates. In terms of assessment, learning can be indicated through the changes in language and behaviour that students exhibit as they complete the task. Instructors can also assess students' performance in the context of any existing assessment rubric.

The activity also allows for a crucial understanding of metaphor itself and its role in everyday discourse. In resisting a view of metaphor as simply the preserve of literary texts, and in encouraging active experimentation with language forms across modes and discourse types, follow-up activities open up new questions about the very nature of communication itself and the social and psychological dimensions of language use.

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