Metaphor analysis in top executive communication: Experiences from three studies of stakeholders’ responses to CEO impression management and a study on German soccer coaches

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Our research studies metaphorical communication used by executives

Examples of CEO’s metaphorical communication

“By yearend, investors ... were bloodied and confused, much as if they were small birds that had strayed into a badminton game.”

*Warren Buffet* – CEO of Berkshire Hathaway
(2008 letter to shareholders)

“This is not a company that needs be *pulled apart and left for the chickens*.”

*Carol Bartz* – former CEO of Yahoo
(2008 Q4 conference call)

“Both parties have input on a plan, so I would say we are both *in the front seat of the car*. In Phase I, *we are in the driver's seat*; in Phase II, *they take over the driver's seat*.”

*Daniel Welch* – former CEO of InterMune
(2007 Q1 conference call)
Cognitive linguistics, particularly Conceptual Metaphor Theory, provides the theoretical basis for our research

Basic assumptions of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993) and framing view of metaphor (Black, 1962)

A metaphor is a figurative expression that refers to one entity (A) by means of another entity (B).

Typically, A is an unfamiliar, abstract entity (target domain); B is a familiar, tangible entity (source domain).

Metaphors work as frames by highlighting some aspects of an issue and downplaying others.

Metaphors are not just figures of speech, but figures of thought, where thinking of target domains is structured through source domains.

E.g., "Our organization is a symphony orchestra" versus "Our organization is a jazz ensemble" (Hatch & Weick, 1998)

• Cognition is, to a large extent even neurologically, structured metaphorically (e.g., POWER IS UP OR TIME IS MONEY);
• The basis of thought are primary source domains such as journey, nature, and violence;
• Speech quasi a priori uses metaphors. However, differences between creative use and reference to source domain.
Metaphorical communication can profoundly influence audiences’ reasoning about, and evaluation of, an issue.

Thibodeau and Boroditskys’ (2011) Experiment: “Metaphors we think with”

**Excerpt from newspaper paragraph participants read**

**Condition A**

Crime is *a wild beast preying on* the city of Addison. [...] it seems that crime is *lurking in* every neighborhood.

**Condition B**

Crime is *a virus infecting* the city [...] it seems that crime is *plaguing* every neighborhood.

**Measures proposed by participants**

Disproportionally often suggest to capture/enforce/punish (74% vs. avg. 65%)

→ focus on law enforcement
→ modify criminal justice system (e.g., institute harsher penalties, build more jails).

Disproportionally often suggest to diagnose/treat/inoculate (56% vs. avg. 35%)

→ investigate underlying cause of the problem
→ social reform to treat or inoculate the community (e.g., fix economy, improve education, provide healthcare)
Both practice- and research-oriented authors advocate using metaphors in stakeholder communication

Examples from the management literature
Four studies provide insight on content analysis of metaphorical communication

Overview of studies


Leaders can run into intricate rhetorical dilemmas when communicating with diverse audiences

Rhetorical dilemma induced by metaphorical communication (König et al., 2017)
Two basic mechanisms are likely to affect how constituents respond to CEO’s reference to certain source domains

General stipulations on the mechanisms (e.g., Ottati & Renstrom, 2010)

- Inferences about an issue, as metaphors highlight and downplay different aspects of it (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011)
- Attributions about the speaker, making him or her appear more or less capable and credible (Mio et al., 2005; Read et al., 1990; Sopory & Dillard, 2002)

CEO’s reference to certain source domains in strategic public language

Constituents’ assessment of the firm
Overall, the CEOs referred to 25 source domain categories when using metaphors

Ranking of source domains (with number of metaphors from respective category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Number of Metaphors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organism</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alimination</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Container</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supernatural</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*13 source domain categories that had only a share of 1% or less in the overall sample where combined in the category “other”. These were (number of metaphors drawn from this category in brackets): ‘crafts’ (12), ‘agriculture’ (10), ‘clothing’ (8), ‘light / darkness’ (7), ‘person’ (7), ‘object’ (6), ‘marriage’ (4), ‘valuables’ (4), ‘cleaning’ (3), ‘crime’ (3), ‘substance’ (2), ‘monarchy’ (1), ‘show’ (1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain Category</th>
<th>% of Sample</th>
<th>Source Domains Referring to:</th>
<th>Example Citation</th>
<th>Exemplary occurrences in CMT Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Sports-related rules, terms, tactics or movements; sports facilities (e.g. arena); types and duration of sports matches and games (e.g. gambling, puzzles, Super Bowl, inning).</td>
<td>“It feels like we just finished the preseason and we’re suited up now and ready to play the Super Bowl again.” (Steve Bennett, Intuit, CC Q1 2007)</td>
<td>game (Eubanks, 1999); race, puzzle (Lakoff, 1994); gamble, play (Özçalışkan, 2003a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Actions and items associated with aviation, driving, sailing and boating; general terrain, road and weather conditions; navigation and itinerary.</td>
<td>“Both parties have input on a plan, ... so I would say we are both in the front seat of the car. In Phase I, we are in the driver’s seat.” (Daniel Welch, InterMune, CC Q1 2007)</td>
<td>journey (Lakoff &amp; Johnson, 1980); destinations (Kövecses, 2003); change of location, departure, motion along a path (Özçalışkan, 2003b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The formation and interpretation of metaphors depend on the originating and receiving contexts

Cultural differences in metaphor use

Primary metaphorical communication (PMC)
- Refers to universal experiences of people from all cultures
- Similar across cultures

Complex metaphorical communication (CMC)
- Increasingly specific...
  - Conceptual basis
  - Required knowledge
  - Value system
- Depends on specific experiences that differ between cultures
- High degree of variation

Eat like a horse
→ Eat like a…
  - dog
  - wolf
  - tiger / cow

Remain neutral in an argument
→ Ver los toros desde la barrea (“Watch the bulls from the fence“)

Travel for the sake of enjoyment
→ Makan angin (“Eat the wind“)

Sources: Boers, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2002; Kövecses, 2005; Liu, 2002; See König et al., 2017
The model hypothesizes on the fit between the level of metaphor complexity and strategy in an MNC

From König et al. 2017, p. 276
We distinguish two dimensions of structural charismatic rhetoric: Cognition-oriented and confidence-transmitting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Rhetoric Elements</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cognition-oriented charismatic rhetoric</strong></td>
<td>All elements of structural charismatic rhetoric that influence receivers’ sensemaking of a given situation by providing rhetorical frames (Chong &amp; Druckman, 2007; Cornelissen &amp; Werner, 2014)</td>
<td><strong>Metaphorical communication</strong>&lt;br&gt;All figurative linguistic expressions that convey thoughts and feelings by describing one domain, A, through another domain, B” (König et al., 2017: 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence-transmitting charismatic rhetoric</strong></td>
<td>All elements of structural charismatic rhetoric that signal a particularly high self-efficacy of the leader and transfer this perception to the receivers’ sense of self-efficacy</td>
<td><strong>Hyperboles</strong>&lt;br&gt;Purposeful exaggeration of a narrative, descriptive (McCarthy &amp; Carter, 2004: 150). <strong>Absence of filled pauses</strong>&lt;br&gt;Litte or no use of brief utterances in a spoken conversation, typically between thoughts, that can occur in different forms, such as um, uh, err, or hmm and are common in spontaneous speech (Brennan &amp; Williams, 1995)</td>
</tr>
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Negative discrepancy to performance reference point positively moderates the effects of charismatic rhetoric.

Figure 1. The Interactive Effects of Discrepancy to Expected Performance and Structural Charismatic Rhetoric on Team Performance.

Marginal Effect of Structural Charismatic Rhetoric (mean-centered)

Illustrative: For a team three times below expected performance in the last three matches, one unit more of charismatic rhetoric (approximately 27 words per hundred words) improves the goal difference on average by 1.2 goals.