Metaphor—The Bridge Between Feelings and Knowledge

Arnold H. Modell, M.D.

Metaphor can be thought of as the currency of the emotional mind. It is now generally accepted that metaphor is fundamentally embodied and is not simply a figure of speech. We now know that metaphor is the expression of a yet to be determined neurophysiological process that has been secondarily coopted by language. I suggested that metaphor unconsciously categorizes emotional experience, establishing similarities and differences between the past and the present. In cases of trauma, the play of similarity and difference becomes constricted, and metaphor loses its capacity to create new emergent meanings. Finally, metaphor enables access to the unconscious and fosters empathic contact with the other.

In the past, the study of metaphor has been the casualty of what philosophers call a category mistake. Metaphor was thought to be only a feature of language, and not seen as a fundamental mode of cognition. For millennia, beginning with Aristotle, metaphor was thought to be a trope, a figure of speech, a kind of verbal slight of hand in which meaning is transferred by means of analogy. Viewed as an aspect of language, the subject of metaphor naturally became the province of philosophers and linguists. This is the OED definition of metaphor: "The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object to which it is not properly applicable." A current definition of metaphor is simply "a mapping or transfer of meaning between different domains." Metaphor not only transfers meaning between different domains, but by means of novel recombinations metaphor can transform meaning. As the domains in question are open-ended in their variety, the possibilities of transformation are nearly infinite. It can be seen that metaphor is central to the imagination, and for this reason I have described metaphor as the currency of the mind.

What linguists and philosophers, in the past, did not recognize is that metaphor is fundamentally an expression of a neurophysiological process that has been secondarily coopted by language. Language makes use of the brain's preexisting cognitive capacities, because cognition and language have coevolved (Deacon 1997). Metaphor represents a biological property, a capacity of mind that is probably uniquely human. Within the last several decades, a group of linguists and philosophers, notably Lakoff and Johnson (1999), have revolutionized how we think about metaphor. They have shown that metaphor is embodied in two respects: first, as the expression of an unconscious, yet to be specified, neural process, and second, that developmentally, the original sources of metaphor are the

Arnold Modell, M.D., is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School; Training and Supervising Analyst at Boston Psychoanalytic Institute; and author of "Imagination and the Meaningful Brain."
sensations and feelings that arise within our bodies. Lakoff (1987) and Johnson (1987) have demonstrated that the body is the original source of metaphor. For example, we are all familiar with the metaphor that the body is a container and that feelings are amongst its contents—hence the expression, “I am about to blow my top.” This original embodiment of metaphor may explain that metaphor retains a self-referential aspect. This self-referential aspect, however, does not apply to all metaphor, as we need to distinguish personal from nonpersonal metaphor.

We believe that young children organize their bodily sensations and feelings into conceptual and perceptual metaphors. Although Freud did not use the term metaphor, he did, in effect, describe the transfer of what he called “equivalent meanings” of libidinal sensations. He was, in effect, describing a metaphoric process. For example, he was referring to the equivalent meanings that can be attributed to the sensations that arise from bodily openings, such as the anus. Freud (1933) noted the metaphoric equivalent meanings of sensations, which children may attribute to feces, baby, and penis. These equivalent meanings of bodily sensations, we know, are the source of fantasies. It can be seen that the bodily sensations that are transformed by means of metaphor serve as templates for the creation of fantasies. That this process occurs in adults as well was shown by Ana-Marie Rizzuto (this issue) in her clinical illustration of the obese patient whose enlarged belly represented an act of “self-parthenogenesis.”

A NOTE ON SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

As psychoanalysts, we are most interested in the personal, idiosyncratic, that is to say private, meaning of metaphor. But as metaphor is also part of language, metaphors can be impersonal, conventional, and fixed in their meaning, in which case they are totally unrelated to the history of the individual. In this sense, there are two broad categories or classes of metaphor—the personal and the impersonal. Symbols can be viewed as impersonal metaphors whose meaning is shared and derived from convention or myth, and can be thought of as cultural artifacts. A snake in a dream may symbolize a penis, a conventional metaphor, or the image of a snake may represent something else entirely that has an idiosyncratic meaning for the dreamer. In another cultural context, that of ancient Greece, snakes did not symbolize the penis, but something very different; snakes represented a curative power associated with the healing cult of Asclepius, who is conventionally represented as leaning on a staff that is intertwined with a snake (Dodds, 1951).

In The Interpretation of Dreams Freud (1900) referred to symbols in dreams as requiring another, very different kind of interpretation, as compared to dream elements that represented the work condensation and displacement. He observed that symbols in dreams have a fixed meaning and can be decoded as a kind of exercise in cryptography. This would be in contrast to the interpretation of the dream by means of free association. Freud (1900) said, “When we have become familiar with the abundant use made of symbolism for representing sexual material in dreams, the question is bound to arise whether many of these symbols do not occur with a permanently fixed meaning, .... and we shall be tempted to draw up a new dream book on the decoding principle” (p. 351).

SPECULATION CONCERNING THE EVOLUTION OF METAPHOR

If one grants that metaphor is primarily a form of cognition, metaphor should be viewed, along with other mental faculties, within an evolutionary context. The fact that bodily movement and
gesture can also be metaphorized suggests that, in the evolution of our species, metaphoric gestures existed as a primordial medium of communication prior to the appearance of spoken language (Donald, 1991). The discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2001) supports this hypothesis. Viewing the action of the other excites the same neurons in the observer as if the observer was performing the specific action of the other. The discovery of mirror neurons provides an objective explanation for the fact that we, and other primates, share an inherent intersubjectivity. Mirror neurons also explains the fact that one immediately understands the meaning of the other’s metaphoric gestures and body language. No translation is needed. As psychoanalysts, we unconsciously respond to the metaphors conveyed by our patient’s bodily movements as they enter our office and make their way to the couch. This apprehension is unconsciously perceived by us and primes us for the affective interchange that follows in the “formal” portion of the hour.

Metaphor then can be viewed as a key element in the biology of meaning. This fact would make it difficult to assert that psychoanalysis is, as some believe, a purely hermeneutic discipline.

METAPHOR AS AN UNCONSCIOUS PROCESS

I have suggested in Imagination and the Meaningful Brain (Modell, 2003) that an unconscious metaphorical process, analogous to dreaming, occurs while we are awake. This idea is consistent with the current view that all mental processes are predominately, and perhaps initially, unconscious. Although Freud in the Ego and the Id described a dynamically repressed unconscious, he earlier stated, “In psychoanalysis there was no choice for us but to assert that mental processes are in themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the sense organs” (Freud, 1915, p. 171).

If metaphor operates unconsciously, what then is its function? I believe that we unconsciously interpret our affective world by means of metaphor in preparation for action. We interpret and categorize our feelings by means of metaphor and autobiographical memory.

Metaphor can be thought of as a pattern detector that recognizes similarities and differences across a nearly infinite variety of domains. When traumatic memories are activated, metaphor recognizes only similarities. However, in conditions of safety, the mode of cognition shifts and affective memory evokes a metaphorical play of similarity and difference and meaning is expanded. Following a suggestion of Gerald Edelman (1998), that the function of memory is to establish categories in a world that is essentially unlabeled, I have claimed that, therefore, metaphor is the organizing template that establishes the categories of emotional memory (Modell, 2003, 2005). Emotional memory has also been called autobiographical or episodic memory by cognitive science. Cognitive science has also established the fact that emotional memory depends on a different neural system, as compared to knowledge-based memory such as remembering the capital of France (Tulving, 1972; Vargha-Khadem, Gadian, et al., 1997).

In order to form emotional categories, an unconscious metaphorical process recognizes multimodal patterns of similarity and difference. This unconscious metaphorical process interprets or judges what is similar or different. In health, metaphor retains its complexity, generating a multiplicity of meanings; in interpreting the memory of trauma, metaphor loses its play of similarity and difference and becomes frozen, involuntary and invariant, and recognizes only similarities.

The great linguist, Roman Jakobson (1995), emphasized that metaphor cannot be understood apart from metonymy. (Metonymy can be defined simply as a part signifying the whole, as illus-
trated by a waitress saying, “The ham sandwich left without paying.”) Jakobson believed that metaphor and metonymy are in opposition to each other. As Anna Aragno (this issue) discusses, Freud avoided the term metaphor. This was also noted by Jakobson, who observed that in Freud’s description of condensation and displacement in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud used the term condensation to describe metaphor and displacement and to describe metonymy. Freud (1901) did not believe that condensation and displacement were in opposition to each other in the formation of dreams, as he thought that they are always combined. I have been able to confirm Jakobson’s assertion of the oppositional relation between metaphor and metonymy in cases of trauma, where metonymy acts as a trigger that constrains the imaginative expansion of metaphor. Instead of generating a complex multiplicity of meaning, in cases of trauma, metaphor establishes only similarities.

Consider this following example. A man, who happened to be a psychiatrist, became intensely frightened if he noted any indication of irrationality or what he feared to be craziness in his wife. This state of affairs was in contrast to his ease and comfort in dealing with irrationality in his patients; he did quite well with very sick patients, especially schizophrenics. The meaning of his intense anxiety in response to his wife’s presumed irrationality could be traced to the fact that, at the age of two or three, the time is uncertain, he inferred that he was a witness to his mother having a spontaneous miscarriage. He was not able to remember the event, but he did reconstruct that, in all probability, his mother became “hysterical” and was emotionally distraught for an undetermined period of time. He felt as if his mother had suddenly and inexplicably gone crazy. When this man then became panicked as a response to his wife’s presumed irrationality, we can infer the presence of an unconscious metaphoric process that melded or blended this childhood memory with his current perceptions and found a correspondence. The emotional category was not simply that of irrational women, but irrational women upon whom he was vitally dependent. Due to metonymy, the metaphoric process lost its ability to play with similarity and difference, instead created a rigid identity between the past and the present.

Irrationality in the other was a metonymic trigger, for this man, that transferred the meaning of events that occurred in early childhood into current time and evoked a global panic reaction. Metonymy triggered the metaphor correspondence between wife and mother that erased the distinction between the past and the here and now. This metonymic trigger of irrationality in the other could only be activated when his vital interests were at stake. It had no effect in his dealings with irrational patients, where he was quite skillful.

We know that metonymic associations trigger transference reactions. It is evident that the metonymy of small similarities between the analyst and the patient’s old images serve as similar triggers in the evocation of transference repetition and enactments. We might envision that metaphor constantly, as an unconscious process, matches ongoing affective experience with old memorial categories. In everyday life metonymic and metaphoric associations to ongoing experience may evoke salient categories of old emotional memories, which may not come to full expression, as they do in transference responses, but form instead a background of anticipation. As metaphor is the interpreter of feelings, our own and that of the other, we may preconsciously construct simulated interactions that may or may not actually occur. An unconscious metaphoric process constructs a simulated anticipatory reality. I wonder whether such unconscious anticipatory imaginings, that are not expressed as actions, serve as day residues, Freud’s famous entrepreneurs of the dream? We now believe that one function of dreaming is the reintegration of memory in accordance with current experience.
METAPHOR ENABLES ACCESS TO THE UNCONSCIOUS

The literary critic William Empson (1947), in his classic work 7 Types of Ambiguity, originally published in 1930, described ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (p. 1). As our discussants noted, analysts frequently cultivate ambiguity in their responses. We do this to foster the expression of metaphor. Freud's original technical recommendations regarding the patient's free associations and the analyst's evenly suspended attention, all foster the expression of metaphor. Bion (1977) observed that if the analyst adopts a state of dreamy reverie, this will enable the patient's unconscious projections and presumably place the analyst in a mode that would foster the interpretation of the patient's unconscious thought. Reverie facilitates the awareness of metaphoric associations. I believe that all of these technical recommendations are aimed at increasing the awareness, expression, and communication of metaphor in both patient and analyst. This was also noted by Jacob Arlow (1979), who said, "In the psychoanalytic situation the interaction of analyst and analysand is an enterprise of mutual metaphoric stimulation in which the analyst, in a series of approximate objectifications of the patient's unconscious thought processes, supplies the appropriate metaphors upon which the essential reconstructions and insights may be built" (p. 381).

I would add that the "mutual metaphoric stimulation" can also evoke a mutual simulation where analyst and patient experience expectant possibilities. Metaphor evokes the construction of imagined possibilities.

In considering the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis, we believe that metaphor contributes to what can be viewed as a self-reinforcing loop. As we have seen, metaphor is central to the communication and interpretation of unconscious meaning. One therapeutic effect of making the unconscious conscious is the creation of new meanings that expand the sense of the agency of the self. There is, then, a synergistic effect: With an expanded sense of agency, there is also an expanded awareness of the complexity of metaphor, which, in turn, can recontextualize traumatic memories. When new meanings replace automatic invariant responses, the sense of the agency of the self is also expanded. There is, then, a self-reinforcing loop that will produce therapeutic change.

Finally, when considering theories of the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis, we need to recognize the salient function that is assumed by metaphor in the establishment of empathic contact with our patients. This is beautifully illustrated in the clinical material presented by Lichtenberg and Rizzuto.

REFERENCES


*Harvard Medical School*
82 Kirkstall Road
*Newtonville, MA 02460*
*Annette617@aol.com*