

# Metaphor and the Dynamics of Knowledge in Organization Theory: A Case Study of the Organizational Identity Metaphor\*

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**ABSTRACT** Despite the increased salience of metaphor in organization theory, there is still very little conceptual machinery for capturing and explaining how metaphor creates and/or reorders knowledge within organization theory. Moreover, prior work on metaphor has insufficiently accounted for the context of interpreting a metaphor. Many metaphors in organization theory, including the 'organizational identity' metaphor, have often been treated in singular and monolithic terms; seen to offer a similar or largely synonymous interpretation to theorists and researchers working along the entire spectrum of disciplines (e.g. organizational behaviour, organizational psychology) in organization theory. We argue in this paper that contextual variation however exists in the interpretation of metaphors in organization theory. This argument is developed by proposing and elaborating on a so-called image-schematic model of metaphor, which suggests that the image-schemata (abstract imaginative structures) that are triggered by the metaphorical comparison of concepts may vary among individuals. Accordingly, once different schemata are triggered the completion and interpretation of a metaphor may equally vary among different individuals or, indeed, research communities. These points associated with the image-schematic model of metaphor are illustrated with a case study of the 'organizational identity' metaphor. The case study shows that this particular metaphor has spiralled out into different research communities and has been comprehended in very different ways as different communities work from very different conceptions, or image-schemata, of 'organization' and 'identity', and use different theoretical frameworks and constructs as a result. The implications of the image-schematic view of metaphor for knowledge development and theoretical progress in organization theory are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

One can hardly fail to notice the flurry of intellectual activity that continues to surround the understanding of the use of metaphor in organization theory. The

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reason for this, which anyone writing on the subject hastens to point out, is that there is still an insufficient understanding of how metaphor actually works, leaving theorists and researchers to doubt its actual place and value within organizational theorizing (Oswick et al., 2002; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982). Our interest in metaphor stems from this same source.

In the following two sections of the paper we will first review the 'orthodox' treatment of metaphor in organization theory; the 'objectivist view' exemplified in a comparison account of how metaphor works. We then move on to advance an alternative account of metaphor, the image-schematic model of metaphor, which has its precepts in Morgan's (1980, 1983) early work and allies with current theoretical advances on metaphor in philosophy, psychology and cognitive science. An image-schematic model of metaphor is proposed and developed as it not only provides for an informed and grounded account of how metaphor works, but also captures and explains the variation in interpretations of a metaphor across individuals and research communities. We argue and demonstrate in this paper that such variation in the interpretation of metaphors exists (rather than considering metaphors in monolithic terms) and needs to be accounted for. After this image-schematic view is circumscribed, the third section of the paper illustrates its use through a case study of the use and development of the 'organizational identity' metaphor in organizational theorizing. The 'organizational identity' metaphor is chosen as it has recently been at the centre of a series of debates around its heuristic value as a metaphor (Cornelissen, 2002; Gioia et al., 2002; Haslam et al., 2003). Our case study may inform these debates on the 'organizational identity' metaphor besides its more general relevance to illustrate the role of metaphor in the development and reordering of theoretical knowledge. In the fourth and final section of the paper, we discuss the implications of the image-schematic view of metaphor for knowledge development and theoretical progress in organization theory.

## THE OBJECTIVIST VIEW OF METAPHOR

In the last two decades, metaphor has achieved a remarkable prominence in philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, and, indeed, organization theory. This trend stands in sharp contrast to an earlier view of metaphor as a derivative issue of only secondary importance. That is, metaphor was thought to be either a deviant form of expression or a non-essential literary figure of speech (Ortony, 1979). In either case, it was generally not regarded as cognitively fundamental. **This denial of any serious cognitive role for metaphor is principally the result of the long-standing popularity of strict 'objectivist' assumptions about language and meaning.** The objectivist view suggests that the world has its structure, and that our concepts and propositions, to be correct, must correspond to that structure. Only literal concepts and propositions can do that since metaphors, as a figurative and playful combination of concepts, assert cross-categorical identities that do not exist

objectively in reality. Metaphors may exist as cognitive processes of our understanding, but their meaning must be reducible to some set of literal concepts and propositions (Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982).

The most long-standing and commonly held account of metaphor within organization theory, as elsewhere, is that metaphors are indeed cognitively reducible to literal propositions (e.g. Haslam et al., 2003; Oswick et al., 2002; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982; Tsoukas, 1991). In this objectivist sense, metaphor is seen as a deviation from, or a derivative function on, proper literal meaning.<sup>[1]</sup> What are called ‘comparison’ or ‘similarity’ accounts of metaphor fall into this ‘objectivist’ category (Cornelissen, 2004). Comparison accounts treat metaphors in the canonical ‘A is B’ form as elliptical similes equivalent to the assertion that ‘A is like B in certain definite respects’. In short, metaphor is seen as a comparison in which the first term A (i.e. the topic or tenor) is asserted to bear a partial resemblance (i.e. the ground) to the second term B (i.e. the vehicle) (Shen, 1997). Our ability to process the metaphor then depends upon our seeing that the A-domain shares certain literal properties and relations with the B-domain. The distinctive feature of comparison accounts is their insistence that the similarities revealed through the metaphorical transfer exist objectively in the world and are expressible in literal propositions (Oswick et al., 2002; Tsoukas, 1991, 1993).

## THE IMAGE-SCHEMATIC VIEW OF METAPHOR

The ‘objectivist’ comparison model assumes, as mentioned, that the features of the constituents are given prior to the comparison (and can be easily decoded and paraphrased) and that a metaphor involves some type of mapping or operation on them (Tourangeau and Sternberg, 1982). The so-called interaction model pioneered by Black (1962, 1979) provides an alternative perspective and proposes that metaphor cannot be reduced to well-defined features or attributes because, when these are specified, one does not get the metaphorical effect in question. The characteristics or features of the vehicle cannot be applied directly to the tenor as the features they ‘share’ are often only shared metaphorically, and thus, Black (1962) suggests, metaphor comprehension cannot be reduced to antecedent literal meanings or to rule-governed extensions or variations on those meanings. Instead of considering metaphor as functioning by likening the tenor to the vehicle, Black (1962) argued that the conjunction of the tenor and the vehicle brings forth a particular selection of each constituent’s semantic aspects and reorganizes them. That is, the presence of the tenor stimulates the hearer to select some of the vehicle’s properties and to construct a ‘parallel implication complex’ to fit the tenor which, in turn, produces parallel changes in the vehicle (Black, 1979). As such, the interaction theory of metaphor suggests that understanding a metaphor *creates* similarity (as correspondences are *constructed*) instead of simply emphasizing and reporting pre-existing, but previously unnoticed, similarities in the features of the

constituent concepts (see also Ortony, 1979). A simpler comparison model, as Morgan (1983) equally pointed out, misses this interactive process of 'seeing-as' or 'conceiving-as' by which an emergent meaning complex is generated.

Subsequent debate within the fields of philosophy, psychology and cognitive science has tended to confirm Black's claim that comparison theories are too reductionistic and atomistic in their accounts of metaphor comprehension. Recent models of metaphor in cognitive science including 'structure-mapping' (e.g. Gentner, 1983; Gentner and Clement, 1988), 'domains-interaction' (e.g. Tourangeau and Sternberg, 1981, 1982), 'metaphoric structuring' (e.g. Murphy, 1996, 1997), and 'cognitive blending' (e.g. Fauconnier and Turner, 1998) have accounted for this idea of an emergent structure of meaning as first conceived of by Black's (1962) interaction model. These models have also effectively extended and validated Black's (1962, 1979) central claims that metaphor involves conjoining whole semantic domains instead of just features of constituents, and that the basic mechanism involved in the production and comprehension of metaphors is not the selection of pre-existing attributes of the conjoined terms as the comparison model implies, but rather the generation and creation of new meaning beyond any similarity that previously existed between them.

Unfortunately, however, these advances in thinking about metaphor have not yet fully found their way into organization theory. That is, although the generative value of metaphor in creating new meaning has indeed become recognized in the slipstream of Morgan's (1980, 1983) work (e.g. Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Chia, 1996; Clark and Mangham, 2004; Gherardi, 2000; Hatch, 1999; Morgan, 1996; Tsoukas 1991, 1993), there is still very little in the way of general conceptual machinery to capture and document how it is that metaphors *can* be creative. Moreover, prior works on metaphor in organization theory have insufficiently accounted for the context of interpreting a metaphor. Many metaphors in organization theory, including the 'organizational identity' metaphor that is discussed below, have often been treated in singular and monolithic terms; seen to offer a similar or largely synonymous interpretation to theorists and researchers working along the entire spectrum of disciplines (e.g. organizational behaviour, organizational psychology, etc) in organization theory. We argue in this paper that contextual variation however exists in the interpretation of metaphors in organization theory, and needs to be accounted for.

Both these aspects of interpreting a metaphor – the emergent meaning that it produces, and the variation in interpretation across individuals and research communities in organization theory – are systematically addressed in the paper. This is, as mentioned, done by developing and elaborating on a so-called image-schematic model of metaphor which suggests that the metaphorical comparison of concepts triggers certain image-schemata (abstract imaginative structures) – that may vary among individuals – and are then blended, completed and elaborated upon into a new, emergent meaning. This model is informed by recent advances in cognitive

science that suggest that metaphors work by blending image-schematic structures that are associated with the tenor and vehicle concepts that it conjoins (Fauconnier and Turner, 1998). We also empirically illustrate its use by describing and explaining knowledge dynamics in organizational theorizing on one topical metaphor: organizational identity.

### Focusing on the Image-Schematic Dimension of Metaphor

In contrast to a reductionist comparison account, from an image-schematic perspective, metaphor is seen as a pervasive and cognitively fundamental way of structuring human understanding where meaning is created through the creative juxtaposition of concepts that are not normally interrelated. A central feature of the image-schematic view of metaphor is that, when metaphor is encountered, the tenor and vehicle concepts first trigger their respective higher-order semantic domains. Lakoff and Turner (1989) and Lakoff (1993) articulated this with the ‘invariance principle’ which proposes that, in metaphor, one attempts to project general image-schematic structure from the larger semantic domain, that the vehicle concept is drawn from, to the target semantic domain that positions the tenor, to the full extent compatibility permits, whilst avoiding the creation of an image-schematic clash in the target (see also Lakoff and Turner, 1989, p. 82; Turner, 1987, pp. 143–8). In other words, as recent work (e.g. Eubanks, 1999; Gibbs, 1992; Glucksberg and Keysar, 1990; Murphy, 1996, 1997; Shen, 1997) suggests, a distinction between higher-order semantic domains and their image-schematic structure and lower-level, instance-specific information of the tenor and vehicle concept, is central to metaphor comprehension (Cornelissen, 2004, 2005). An image-schema can be defined as a basic and abstract imaginative structure that is triggered by each of the two concepts conjoined in metaphor (e.g. ‘organization’ and ‘identity’) and that, when integrated, organizes our mental representations.

In this sense, metaphorical mappings ‘preserve the cognitive typology (that is, the image-schema structure) of the source domain [that positions the vehicle], in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain [that positions the tenor]’ (Lakoff, 1993, p. 215). Furthermore, once such image-schemata belonging to the tenor and vehicle concepts match with one another, further instance-specific information from the tenor and vehicle concepts is transferred in metaphor and blended with one another (e.g. Eubanks, 1999; Murphy, 1996, 1997; Shen, 1997). ‘Blending’ composes elements from the tenor and vehicle concepts and, furthermore, lead us to complete and elaborate upon the composition made so that a new meaning emerges (Cornelissen, 2004, 2005; Fauconnier and Turner, 1998). In the case of the ‘organizational learning’ metaphor, for example, this means that once it was established that in a structural sense ‘organization’ and ‘learning individual’ are alike as their image-schemata matched – i.e. the image-schemata that cognitive, mental activities are engaged in for both entities and acquired information

and knowledge is stored in collective or individual residuals (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991) – further instance specific information from both the tenor and vehicle concepts was sourced and blended. The implication of ‘individual agency’ from the ‘learning individual’ vehicle concept, for instance, was blended with collective learning within the ‘organization’ and has led theorists to complete and elaborate upon this composition by considering how collective learning can be imagined as an entity of its own (instead of being conceived of as an aggregate of individual learning) (Argyris and Schön, 1978), how an organization can become ‘adaptive’ through all the connected learning behaviours and activities that it professes with respect to its environment (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991), and how this type of learning can become a ‘sustainable competitive advantage’ (Miner and Mezias, 1996, p. 90).

Building on this example, the image-schematic view of metaphor comprehension is conceptually characterized by three steps. First, upon encountering a metaphor, whatever image-schematic structure is recognized as belonging to both the tenor and vehicle concepts in their domains constitutes a generic match. This then provides the ground for further connections and projections to be made between the tenor and vehicle concepts. This first step – image-schematic matching – is guided by the invariance principle referred to earlier. After such an image-schematic match is constructed, further instance-specific information is, as said, transferred from the tenor and vehicle concepts and elaborated upon. ‘Blending’, the second step in metaphor comprehension, composes elements from the tenor and vehicle concepts and, furthermore, leads an individual (theorist or researcher) to *complete* and *elaborate* upon the composition made. The ‘blend’, or emergent meaning that subsequently comes off it, is the third and final step of metaphor comprehension. It concerns the more specific meaning resulting from the comparison which, because of the combination of elements from the tenor and vehicle, makes relations available that did not exist in these separately (cf. Fauconnier and Turner, 1998, pp. 145–6).

### **Metaphor, Context and Knowledge Dynamics**

Seen from this image-schematic view, each metaphor, therefore, leads to meaning creation and provides for a particular understanding of the world of organizations. Through image-schematic projection, and a further blending of implications from both the tenor and vehicle concepts, a new meaning emerges that cannot be reduced to its antecedent parts. Put differently, the image-schematic projection, the further blending, and the emergent meaning structure that results from it are, it needs to be recognized, not merely compositional – instead, there is new meaning constituted in and through the metaphor that is not a composition of meanings that can be found in either the tenor or vehicle concepts *per se* (Cornelissen, 2004, 2005).

Due to this emergent meaning, metaphors may thus provide startling new images and new ways of understanding organizations that in any case were inconceivable before (Chia, 1996; Gherardi, 2000; Morgan, 1980, 1983; Weick, 1989). Such metaphorical images in turn are often reduced, translated and 'systematized' within extended theorizing and research into constructs and conjectures (Beyer, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Tsoukas, 1991). Here, there is an important difference between metaphorical images that exist in a pre-conceptual, non-propositional form and the models, constructs and propositions that are derived from them and that figure in extended theorizing and research. Metaphorical images, and the image-schematic projections that constitute them, are embodied imaginative structures of human understanding that give coherent, meaningful structure to our experience at a preconceptual level (Fauconnier and Turner, 1998; Johnson, 1987), although indeed, within our theorizing endeavours, we often proceed with discussing them in the abstract and reducing and explicating them in propositional terms. It is also important to note that such a process of conventionalizing metaphors and translating them into theoretical models and constructs does not imply that such models and constructs are completely devoid of metaphorical meaning. It has often been suggested, particularly by those writing from the perspective of a comparison model of metaphor, that metaphors follow a certain 'life cycle' pattern. That is, a metaphor starts out being 'live', where it is characterized by a metaphoric transfer and is seen as suggestive of a particular organizational phenomenon, but, over time, it will gradually 'die' (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982, Tsoukas, 1991). This happens, the argument goes, when the metaphor has been effectively reduced to the 'literal' model that it implied; and when this model has become so familiar and so habitual in theoretical vocabulary that not only have researchers ceased to be aware of its metaphorical precepts, but have also stopped to ascribe such qualities to it (Hunt and Menon, 1995). The image-schematic framework of metaphor rather indicates that a metaphor creates emergent meaning, which instead of being a direct derivative function on literal models, shapes and forms theoretical models, constructs and empirical research. And, importantly, because of its emergent meaning, a metaphor may become conventionalized, or 'dead' for lack of a better word, '... but deadness does [thus] not eliminate the metaphorical element' (McCloskey, 1983, p. 506).

Embodied in this manner, the image-schemata that lie at the root of metaphorical images are themselves not propositional in that they are not abstract subject-predicate structures. Rather an image-schema exists in a continuous, analogue fashion in our understanding (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1993) and, when brought to bear upon a different realm of our experience, it must fit if it is to be coherent and comprehensible. The image-schema invoked by the 'theatre' concept, for instance, has been variously applied to different target subjects including identity formation within social psychology (e.g. Goffman, 1959), human consciousness within the cognitive and brain sciences (e.g. Baars, 1997), and rituals and behaviour within



organization theory (e.g. Mangham and Overington, 1987). What such a wide application shows is that image-schemata connect up a vast range of different experiences that manifest the same recurring structure, and that they are not rigid or fixed, however, but are altered in their application to particular situations.

This is indeed true of the many metaphors that abound in organization theory, including the examples just discussed ('organization as machine', 'organization as learning individual', 'organization as theatre'), and that revolve around image-schematic structures that are relatively fluid schematizing patterns that get altered in the various organizational contexts to which they are applied. In other words, metaphors and the image-schemata that they are based on are not eternally fixed objects, but they gain a certain relative stability by becoming conventionally located in a research community's network of meaning. The meaning evoked by a certain metaphor may then be conventionalized by members of that community, and be treated as 'fixed' (and even, as said, be worked out into 'literal' constructs and conjectures). But it is necessary, however, to remember that even these conventionalized meanings are never wholly context-free – they depend upon a large background of shared schemata, capacities, practices and knowledge of the community involved.

This dynamic and contextual character of image-schemata has important implications for our view of knowledge and knowledge development through metaphors within organization theory. It suggests first of all that a certain metaphor may or may not connect with the conceptualizations and practices of a certain community (e.g. organizational psychology, organizational behaviour, organizational communication) within organization theory, and thus be found useful, dependent upon whether the image-schema evoked by the vehicle concept matches up with that community's image-schema of the tenor concept of 'organization'. In this sense, metaphors and their embodied image-schemata 'serve as prime targets and tools of analyses in the realm of knowledge dynamics', allowing for 'study of the (at times) inconspicuous mechanisms of knowledge production' (Maasen and Weingart, 2000, p. 37). The contextual character of image-schemata in metaphors furthermore suggests that dependent on the schemata that are triggered for a certain individual by the correlated concepts in a metaphor, the interpretation of a metaphor may be unique to that individual or the research community of which he/she is part. Accordingly, interpretations of any one single metaphor may vary between individuals and research communities. And, finally, on a more general note, the image-schematic view of metaphor also suggests to correct the popular, but misguided, view that knowledge generated through metaphor in organization theory involves only the imposition of static images and concepts. Rather, metaphorical understanding and the knowledge that may emerge from it is an evolving process or activity in which image-schemata (as organizing structures) partially order and form a certain community's perspective and are modified by their embodiment in concrete experiences of research and further experimentation. These points about



the dynamic and contextual nature of metaphorical interpretation can perhaps be more clearly understood if we focus on one example in more detail.

### CASE STUDY: ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

The metaphor of ‘organizational identity’, paraphrased as ‘organization’ as ‘(personal) identity’, has moved centre stage in organization theory in recent years. Since the watershed article of Albert and Whetten (1985, p. 293) raised the issue of whether we can metaphorically project an ‘identity’ upon organizations to describe and explain their dynamics, organization theory has seen a rash and marked increase of conceptual deliberations and empirical work using and referring to the ‘organizational identity’ metaphor (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). The concept of ‘organizational identity’ is considered metaphorical in that it involves a linguistic utterance in which the combination of words is conjunctive, semantically anomalous at first (‘organizations do not *literally* have an identity’) and also literally deviant in the sense that the source or vehicle term of ‘identity’ has originally or conventionally been employed in relation to different concepts and domains (i.e. individuals and groups within social psychology) before it was applied and connected to the target term of ‘organization’ (cf. Gibbs, 1996; Ortony, 1979). The increase in theoretical and research attention on ‘organizational identity’ has been attributed to the depth and profundity of the covering ‘identity’ concept that integrates different levels of analysis – individual (i.e. people’s individual identity within an organizational context), collective (i.e. the social identity of groups within an organizational context) and organizational (i.e. the identity of the whole organization) (Brown, 2001) – and the generative and versatile nature of the ‘organizational identity’ metaphor itself that is credited as having opened up various avenues for theoretical development and revelation (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). Indeed, theoretical development on ‘organizational identity’ is characterized by an ‘amazing theoretical diversity’ (Pratt and Foreman, 2000b, p. 141) where the same term (‘organizational identity’) is conceptualized from very different theoretical perspectives and refers to different conceptual objects (e.g. beliefs held by individuals, the discourse of individuals, bundles of capabilities of an organization, etc).

Both the increased attention and the ensuing theoretical diversity can be understood, we suggest, by appreciating, to a greater extent than before, the very nature and capacity of ‘organizational identity’ *as a metaphor*. The surge of attention, first of all, can be attributed to the ‘organizational identity’ metaphor’s linguistic characteristics including its novelty, creativity (in the play of words), figurative nature, and, importantly, its polysemy. From the linguistic perspective, this polysemy, or ‘interpretive viability’, refers to the plurality and openness of interpretation that a metaphor exhibits which effectively allows for a metaphor’s rapid and wide distribution whenever it links up with other meanings in existing academic discourses

and research traditions (e.g. organizational behaviour, organizational psychology, etc) and whenever it provides a sounding board that resonates (cf. Maasen and Weingart, 1995, 2000). The theoretical diversity encountered by the 'organizational identity' metaphor is, on the other hand, the result of the very different ways in which various authors comprehend and apply the metaphor where they are working from very different image-schemata concerning 'identity' and 'organization'. We will demonstrate below that the metaphorical correlation of concepts in the 'organizational identity' metaphor has not only schematized theoretical perspectives in very different ways, but has also provided a conceptual logic (of 'identity') for reasoning about organizations and their manifestations.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Our aims for this paper were to identify and draw out the different image-schemata through which various authors theorize and research 'organizational identity' in a far more comprehensive manner than previous commentaries (Gioia, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000, 2002) have done and to illustrate, by way of example, how the metaphor has been understood through the lens of the image-schematic model. To give this shape, we started with a search of four databases (Social Sciences Citation Index, Science Citation Index, Psyc-INFO, and ABI-Inform) using the keywords 'organizational' and 'identity' either in a string or separately, to identify articles where mention was made of 'organizational identity' in either the title, abstract or keywords of the article. In this way, 132 articles were initially identified (October 2003). These 132 articles were further screened, and articles that made only a passing reference to 'organizational identity' (rather than using it as a metaphor or construct in the article's theoretical claims and analysis) were deleted from the list, as were articles that turned out to focus instead on the topics of organizational identification and organizational commitment of individuals or groups within the organization. Eighty-one articles remained after this screening. All of these articles were read by us (the researcher and research assistant working on the project) with the purpose of both identifying the schemata lying at the root of the 'organizational identity' metaphor's use in each of these articles and of understanding the different interpretations made. In an image-schematic model of metaphor, it will be recalled, image-schematic matching of two concepts is seen as the building block of metaphorical comprehension (before this matching, and the metaphorical image that it construes, is further elaborated on and completed to an emergent meaning). Therefore each of us individually read the 81 articles with the explicit purpose of deciphering and documenting how the two concepts conjoined in the 'organizational identity' metaphor – 'organization' and 'identity' – were referred to or defined. In a number of articles it turned out that such definitions were not always clearly given or explicitly formulated, and in such cases the base definitions – or schemata as we call them – of the concepts of 'identity' and 'organization' were

traced by deconstructing the eventual metaphorical interpretation of the 'organizational identity' metaphor. Here, the image-schematic model was used as a theoretical lens to retrieve the image-schemata of the 'organization' and 'identity' concepts that were matched and blended, and further elaborated on into the emergent meaning and interpretation of the 'organizational identity' metaphor that was documented in the article. The definitions or image-schemata that each of us individually had identified were subsequently laid next to one another and conceptual categories were constructed from them. By constructing these categories, the data of the content analysis moved from an empirical to a conceptual level (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Specifically, the following three analytical steps were taken. First, the identified articles were read by both coders independently, and the contents of these articles were coded with the help of the image-schematic model. The model sensitized us to search for interpretations of the metaphor and for the ways in which its input concepts ('organization' and 'identity') are defined. Each of us subsequently wrote down the identified base definitions – or image-schemata as we call them – of 'organization' and 'identity' for each article together with the meaning ascribed to the 'organizational identity' metaphor, and then ordered and named the written material into categories. Second, once all of the 81 articles were read, interpreted and roughly ordered, each of us took time to integrate, refine and arrange categories so that these began to come together as a more conceptual whole. Here, each of us compared and contrasted interpretations of 'organizational identity' and their embedded image-schemata into coherent and significant categories. Third, the individually identified categories were laid next to one another, compared and integrated. Each of the coders had identified six categories. Between the two coders, then, there were only some small differences in the initial names given to categories, and in the fact that material that was coded as a significant category by one coder was classified as a 'miscellaneous' category by the other (i.e. the research assistant working on the project). Discussions were subsequently held on the identified categories, and their names, and it was decided to include the disputed category as a significant category.

All of the six significant categories are displayed in Table I and represent the general ways in which the metaphor of 'organizational identity' is used and understood, as emerging from the content analysis. Here, we identified and named several 'research traditions' as separate analytical categories that are sufficiently distinct from one another. Each of these 'research traditions' was abstracted from the data of our content analysis as significant and coherent categories (and labelled subsequently), although of course the research that is classified within them may be more diverse and heterogeneous in terms of specific theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Each of these categories can furthermore be considered as representative of the theorizing and research of a group of academic researchers – in a sense indicating a 'research tradition' as we will argue below – although, it needs

to be noted, individual researchers may not always neatly fall into one of the categories. That is, individual researchers may over time be more diffuse and variable in their interpretation and use of the 'organizational identity' metaphor. The communications scholar Taylor, for instance, initially based his work in a language-based account of the metaphor of 'organizational identity' (Taylor and Cooren, 1997), but has now shifted towards a position where the concept of 'organization', and as a corollary the concept of 'organizational identity', is not only seen to reside in language but also in physical systems and contexts (Taylor, personal communication). Bearing this caveat in mind, the data from the content analysis and the general categories that we constructed provides a representative overview of the variety of ways in which the metaphor of 'organizational identity' is understood.

### Case Study Findings

Our content analysis revealed a wide variety in the embedded image-schemata of 'identity' and 'organization', as such pointing to considerable differences in the way in which the metaphor of 'organizational identity' itself is understood. Table I shows the different image-schemata in use that we identified, and that we labelled with names to depict the very different 'research traditions' in play. These are the 'organizational communication' (5 articles), 'organizational behaviour' (21 articles), 'cognitive framing' (28 articles), 'discursive psychology' (10 articles), 'institutional theory' (11 articles), and the 'social identity' (6 articles) research traditions. These identified 'research traditions' incorporate the 'institutional', 'cognitive framing' (or 'sensemaking') and 'social identity' perspectives on 'organizational identity' that have frequently been mentioned as dominant streams of literature on the subject (Gioia, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000, 2002; Haslam et al., 2003; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Whetten and Mackey, 2002).

Table I illustrates that the concept of 'organization' itself evokes very different image-schemata (cf. Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1996). Furthermore, Table I shows that each of the image-schemata evoked for 'identity' singularly match up with each of the different image-schemata evoked for 'organization', and subsequently has led to further blending, elaboration and completion of the construed metaphorical image into an emergent meaning (see Table I). The important point to note here is that the 'invariance principle' referred to earlier, which proposes that in metaphor organizational theorists attempt to project and match general image-schematic structure from the vehicle or source ('identity') to the target ('organization') to the full extent compatibility permits, is indeed illustrated with this deconstruction of the 'organizational identity' metaphor as set out in Table I.

Due to this 'invariance principle', which allows for the combination of different image-schemata into congruent images, the academic literature on 'organizational identity' is, as mentioned diverse, as theorists work from different image-schemata

Table I. An image-schematic view of the 'organizational identity' metaphor

<i>Research tradition</i>	<i>Image-schema of 'organization'</i>	<i>Image-schema of 'identity'</i>	<i>Emergent meaning</i>	<i>Selected references</i>
Organizational communication	Organization is constituted in and through language	The identity of an entity exists in and through language	Organizational identity is the imposition of an actor ('corporate rhetor') in and through corporate language	Cheney (1991), Levitt and Nass (1994), Taylor (1999), Taylor and Cooren (1997)
Organizational behaviour	Organization as a physical system consisting of specific features and characteristics (competencies, products, skills, etc)	Identity is housed in the unique and distinctive character traits of an individual	Organizational identity refers to those unique characteristics and features of a company that give it specificity, stability and coherence	Larçon and Reitter (1979), Albert and Whetten (1985), Kogut and Zander (1996), Balmer and Greyser (2002)
Cognitive framing	Organization as a cognitive lens for scanning, shifting, filtering and relaying information (sense-making)	Sense-making or framing process of 'who one is'	Organizational identity is a self-referential cognitive frame or perceptual lens for sense-making	Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Elsbach and Kramer (1996), Gioia and Thomas (1996), Dukerich, Golden and Shortell (2002)
Discursive psychology	Organization is discursively constructed through the language and sense-making of its members	Identity is discursively (re)constructed in talk and discourse between actors in a social context	Organizational identity is the social and discursive construction of collective meaning	Maguire et al. (2001), Phillips and Hardy (1997), Humphreys and Brown (2002a, 2002b)
Institutional theory	Organization as an actor in institutional fields	An identity is symbolically enacted, and thus constituted, within a social context	Organizational identity is the symbolic projection and enactment of the organization as a unitary actor in its environment	Czarniawska and Wolff (1998), Lounsbury and Glynn (2001), Hatch and Schultz (2002), Glynn and Abzug (2002), Frol (2001), Glynn (2000)
Social identity	Organization is the collective product of group cognitions, sense-making and behaviour	Identity is established through categorization of individuals in groups (in- and out-groups) and a social comparison between them	Organizational identity resides in shared group cognition ('oneness with the organization') and connected behaviours	Ashforth and Mael (1989), Hogg and Terry (2000), Haslam et al. (2003)

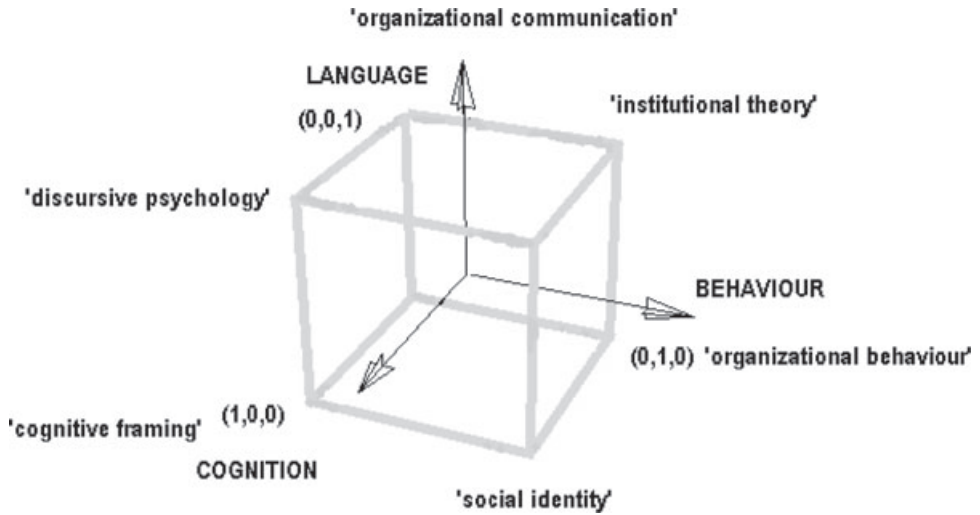


Figure 1. Different research traditions on the 'organizational identity' metaphor

*Note:* The figure visualizes the general categories of 'research traditions' that were identified. Here, each of these traditions is considered as an analytically separate category, although these research traditions may at least to some degree overlap and interpenetrate in the actual practice of theorizing and research on 'organizational identity'.

of 'organization' and 'identity' (and, as a corollary, use and refer to different constructs and conjectures), and is also far from coherent. This diversity can perhaps best be understood when we consider the different embedded image-schemata of the target concept of 'organization' (that the 'organizational identity' metaphor is projected upon) in terms of where 'organization' is located and wherein it is constituted: in language, cognitions and/or behaviour. Figure 1 visualizes and displays the positioning of the different research traditions identified in Table I along these three dimensions (language, cognition and behaviour) on the basis of their root image-schema of 'organization'.

The purpose of the following discussion is to elaborate on the different 'research traditions' in relation to the 'organizational identity' metaphor, and more specifically, to illustrate how the image-schematic model of metaphor works and has contributed to the schematizing of perspectives. Thus, the following discussion retraces the steps of the image-schematic model of metaphor comprehension for each of these 'research traditions'.

*Organizational communication tradition.* At the language end of the three-dimensional space in Figure 1, the assumption driven by 'organizational communication' researchers is that 'communication' or language use is constitutive of 'organization' and that both concepts should be seen as a duality (i.e. communicating is organizing and organizing is communicating) (Cheney, 1991; Levitt and Nass, 1994; Taylor, 1999; Taylor and Cooren, 1997). In this sense, communication and the use

of language (i.e. speech, discourse and rhetoric) becomes the basis of 'organization' and therefore it is only possible to conceive and talk of an 'organizational identity' as grounded in language and as having 'no existence other than in discourse, where [its] reality is created, and sustained, to believe otherwise is to fall victim to reification' (Taylor and Cooren, 1997, p. 429). This particular metaphorical interpretation (see Table I) of 'organizational identity' emerges from the blending of the 'organization' and 'identity' image-schemata identified in Table I, and further completion and elaboration. Through further completion and elaboration, an image or meaning effectively emerges of a 'corporate rhetor' being (re)presented in all language, including advertisements and corporate texts, of the organization.

*Organizational behaviour tradition.* The views expressed by the 'organizational behaviour' research tradition, positioned at the far end of the behavioural dimension, are obviously at odds with an extreme language position, or indeed a cognitive grounding of 'organization' for that matter. In a behavioural tradition, it is possible to speak of 'organizational identity' in material and aspectual terms (outside of the cognitions and language use of members of an organization), denoting certain characteristic tangible and intangible features of an organization, as 'organization' itself is conceived in those terms. Theorists in this behavioural tradition refer to specific identity characteristics or 'traits' of an organization in all of its strategies, artifacts, values and practices that give the company its specificity, stability and coherence (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Cornelissen, 2002; Kogut and Zander, 1996, p. 506; Larçon and Reitter, 1979, p. 43; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997; Peteraf and Shanley, 1997, p. 167; Rohlinger, 2002, p. 481). This interpretation of the 'organizational identity' metaphor is based upon the blending of the image-schemata identified in Table I, and is further completed and elaborated on to form an interpretation of organizations as unique, coherent and stable sets of activities, values and people.

*Cognitive framing tradition.* At the cognition end of the three-dimensional space, the 'cognitive framing' tradition sees 'organization' as constituted in the cognitions of individual organizational members which together (when aggregated) constitute a collective cognitive lens for processing information and organizational sense-making (see Putnam et al., 1996). 'Organizational identity', on the back of this image-schema of 'organization', is itself seen as a cognitive frame (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Scott and Lane, 2000) or perceptual lens (Dukerich et al., 2002; Fiol, 2002; Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Gioia and Thomas, 1996, Gioia et al., 2000; Labianca et al., 2001) for organizational and individual sense-making activities. That is, through the blending of the image-schemata of 'organization' and 'identity' (Table I), and further completion and elaboration, 'organizational iden-



tity' is interpreted as a collective self-definition or cognitive self-representation of organizational members ('who are we?') that is 'generally embedded in deeply ingrained and hidden assumptions' (Fiol and Huff, 1992, p. 278) and refers to those features that are perceived 'as ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive in character [and] that contribute to how they define the organization and their identification with it' (Gioia and Thomas, 1996, p. 372).

The 'organizational behaviour', 'organizational communication', and 'cognitive framing' traditions all occupy extreme positions in Figure 1, emphasizing either behaviour, language or cognition as constitutive of 'organization'. The other three identified research traditions ('discursive psychology', 'institutional theory', and 'social identity') occupy more intermediate positions.

*Discursive psychology tradition.* The 'discursive psychological' strand considers 'organizations are socially constructed from networks of conversations or dialogues; the intertextuality, continuities and consistencies of which serve to maintain and objectify reality for participants' (Humphreys and Brown, 2002a, p. 422). In other words, 'organization' in this sense is constituted not only through discursive acts (i.e. language), but also through the sensemaking of the members of the organization as interactants (i.e. cognition) (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1992). Working from this image-schema of 'organization', the metaphorical interpretation that subsequently emerges after blending with the image-schema of 'identity', and further completion and elaboration (see Table I), is that 'organizational identity' refers to collective meaning that is discursively (re)constructed in a social context. And with this metaphorical interpretation, theorists in this tradition have also taken issue with 'behaviourist' objective and material conceptions of 'organizational identity' as 'essential' and 'fixed', as in a discursive sense identity is continuously (re)structured and therefore processual, situational, fractured, contested, dynamic, precarious, and fluid (Czarniawska, 1997; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Humphreys and Brown, 2002a, 2002b; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, p. 63; Maguire et al., 2001, p. 304; Martin, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 1997).

*Institutional theory tradition.* The research strand informed by 'institutional theory' sees organizations as unitary actors in and through connected language and behaviour rather than as systems, shared cognitions or bundles of practices and routines negotiated and contested through the daily interaction of their members (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Based on this image-schema of 'organization' as a unitary actor, and coupled with the notion that an 'identity' is symbolically enacted (Table I), the metaphorical interpretation that emerges after blending, and further completion and elaboration, is that an organization is seen to symbolically construct an identity through behaviour and language use within organizational fields (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998). Within this interpretation, the symbolic construction of 'organizational identity' happens through language (e.g. corporate names,

rhetorics, narratives, stories) (Glynn and Abzug, 2002) and culturally patterned practices (e.g. organizational dress, ideological script, rites and rituals, artifacts) (Glynn, 2000; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997) with the overall objective of differentiating and legitimizing the organization with stakeholders in its environment (Fiol, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Randel, 2002). A number of institutional theorists have argued in this respect, that an account of 'organizational identity' effectively 'needs to be situated within institutional dynamics' (Glynn and Abzug, 2002, p. 277) over and beyond alternative theoretical perspectives and research traditions, as such an institutional perspective alone can capture organizations' unique status as 'social actors' (Hatch and Schultz, 2002, p. 1004; Whetten and Mackey, 2002, p. 395).

*Social identity tradition.* The 'social identity' approach, lastly, interprets in line with its embedded image-schema of 'organization' (see Table I), an 'organizational identity' as a property of a collective of individual organizational members where it resides in both cognitions and perceptions of what is shared, but also in behavioural roles, symbols, artifacts, and other material products within the organization (Haslam et al., 2003; Pratt and Foreman, 2000a, p. 20). This interpretation is based on the blending of the image-schemata of 'organization' as encompassing both collective cognitions and behaviour, and 'identity' as a (self)-categorization process, and further completion and elaboration of the blend thus construed. In this sense, the 'social identity' interpretation of 'organizational identity' extends and progresses on traditional cognitive social identity approaches that strictly focus on the ways in which individuals can be seen as part of a collective entity in the mind of themselves and others by analysing processes of (self)-categorization and psychological commitment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1972), to consider how such social identity categorizations give rise to patterns of organizational behaviour (Bartel, 2001; Haslam et al., 2003; Hogg and Terry, 2000a, 2000b; Pratt, 1998). Working from this theoretical extension of 'social identity' theory, 'organizational identity' is, as Haslam et al. (2003) have recently suggested, both a 'psychological and social reality' and a 'mental and material fact', as it embodies both cognitive categorization processes that take place in the minds of individuals, and collective products of those processes and the activities they encourage. The guiding premise in this regard, is that once a particular organizational identity has become salient for a particular group of members of the organization and once particular norms and values have come to define it, 'organizational identity' not only has an impact on the psychological make-up of individuals but should also help translate that psychology into collective products such as plans and visions, goods and services, practices, institutions and organizations (Haslam, 2001).

. . . as a form of social identity, shared organizational identity is a basis not only for people to perceive and interpret their world in similar ways, but also for

processes of mutual social influence which allow them to coordinate (and expect to coordinate) their behavior in ways that lead to concerted social action and collective products. (Haslam et al., 2003, p. 364)

In all, the above discussion of the different research traditions in 'organizational identity' points out that this particular metaphor has spiralled out into different research communities and has been translated and comprehended in very different ways. Furthermore, with each of these research traditions working from very different image-schemata of 'organization' and 'identity', and consequently using very different theoretical frameworks and constructs, knowledge development and theoretical progress is often confined to the particular research tradition and community of theorists and researchers working within it. There has been fairly little interaction or conceptual borrowing between research traditions – the only exception being that Albert and Whetten's (1985) conception of identity, as referring to features that are fundamental (central), uniquely descriptive (distinctive), and persistent over time (enduring), has found its way into different research traditions where it has been accommodated and integrated with existing schemata of those importing traditions. Glynn (2000, p. 285), for instance, reworked this concept, initially stemming from a behaviourist tradition, into a discursive and language based account where it refers to that which is 'claimed' as central, distinctive and enduring in and through narratives issued by the organization. And Gioia and Thomas (1996, p. 372), from a cognitive framing perspective, have reworked and accommodated it into their research tradition by referring to cognitive representations of individuals of what they perceive as ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive in character about the organization.

Due to these divergent image-schemata, going back to root, fundamental assumptions of 'organization' and 'identity', we also found that there are little if any signs of a greater convergence between research traditions and the theoretical frameworks that these traditions espouse. This obviously has considerable implications for knowledge development in organization theory, a point that we elaborate on in the next and closing section of the paper.

## **DISCUSSION AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS**

The case study of the 'organizational identity' metaphor has shown the specific, yet related ways, in which individual academic discourses and communities ('research traditions') have experimented with this metaphor. More specifically, the case study has accounted, at a linguistic level, for the linkage function of metaphor by pointing to the discourse-specific, yet (at times) related, processing of metaphor within different academic realms. That is, as diverse as each of these academic discourses as 'organizational communication' and 'organizational behaviour' are, they have in common that they all resonate with the 'organizational identity'

metaphor (because of the linguistic appeal and interpretive viability of the metaphor), albeit each with certain aspects of it because of the varied background of their research traditions. At a semantic level, the case study has elaborated upon the creative and transformative effect of the 'organizational identity' metaphor where through its schematizing of mental representations it has provided for various novel perspectives across these research traditions, as well as for prospects for extended theorizing and research.

### **Contributions and Research Implications**

Building on from this case study, the introduction of the image-schematic model provides several contributions to our understanding of how metaphor works and how its role and effects can be understood within the context of organizational theorizing and research.

A first important contribution is that the image-schematic model provides a fundamental theoretical understanding of how metaphor operates within organizational theorizing. Here, the image-schematic model provides a set of principles of how metaphor works (i.e. image-schematic matching, blending, and emergent meaning) and explains how a metaphor produces a new, emergent meaning that is more than the sum of its parts. Prior work within organization theory, while recognizing the generative value of metaphor, has stopped short of suggesting a set of constitutive principles of how metaphor works. The image-schematic model that we have developed and illustrated here enters into and elaborates on this point. It is well grounded in evidence from cognitive scientific research on metaphor and provides a more valid account of how metaphor works than the objectivist 'comparison' accounts (Oswick et al., 2002; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982; Tsoukas, 1991) or simple 'projective mapping' approaches (Gherardi, 2000; Morgan, 1980, 1983) that have gone before. An objective comparison account with its suggestion of a comparison of similarity between two concepts – a symmetrical relation – as the sole mechanism of metaphor (cf. Shen, 1997) is incapable of explaining why a metaphor such as 'organizational identity' makes sense to organizational theorists and researchers and is then used in theorizing and research. In fact, the meanings attributed by theorists and researchers to the 'organizational identity' metaphor, as discussed above, provides little ground for inferring that an antecedent and ingrained similarity between the two conjoined concepts ('organization' and 'identity') existed. Rather, it appears, the similarity between these two concepts has been constructed, as these concepts were (prior to their correlation) not primed, lexicalized with one another or, indeed categorically related. Equally, the projective mapping model proposed by Morgan (1980, 1983), and elaborated on ever since, falls short as it fails to account for the fact that many metaphors in organization theory, including such metaphors as 'organizational identity' and 'organization mind' (Weick and Roberts, 1993) derive their force not from a local resemblance

between concepts but rather from mapping, projecting and elaborating upon the system of relationships in which these concepts are embedded (cf. Gentner et al., 2001, p. 241). In other words, instead of a simple substitutive process with the source or vehicle concept acting as a lens for seeing and considering the target concept, a metaphor sets up intricate sets of relationships between two concepts which are then actively elaborated upon into a new emergent meaning. The image-schematic model of metaphor accounts for this feat of metaphors and describes and explains how metaphors create new, emergent meanings through the blending of image-schematic structures.

A second contribution of the image-schematic model is that it not only theoretically underpins how metaphor works in organizational theorizing, but also provides an account of the contextual variation in interpreting a metaphor across individuals and research communities. Here, the image-schematic model proposes the invariance principle which provides an explanation for different interpretations of a certain metaphor. The principle suggests that the mixing and matching of concepts in metaphor, and its subsequent interpretation, is an evolving process or activity that is not context-free – the image schemata that certain concepts (like ‘organization’ and ‘identity’) evoke when they are compared depends upon the background of assumptions, practices and knowledge of the individual or community of researchers involved. Once image-schemata, conceptualized as abstract imaginative structures for certain correlated concepts, match for a certain individual or research community, the combination of schemata is then elaborated on, and together with further instance-specific information from the tenor and vehicle concepts completed into a new emergent meaning. The important point here is that image-schemata as abstract imaginative structures may vary between individuals and research communities, and that thus the emergent meanings that are produced as a result may vary as well. The case study of the ‘organizational identity’ metaphor illustrated this point, and draws furthermore attention to the importance of analysing and understanding metaphors at a deeper semantic level than just considering metaphor as a linguistic, rhetorical or discursive phenomenon. The case study clearly shows that this single metaphor has been interpreted in very different ways, and that there has been little explicit acknowledgement or consideration of these semantic differences. In the light of these findings, we therefore suggest that the image-schematic model is used as a set of principles (i.e. image-schematic matching, blending, and the emergent meaning) by organizational theorists and researchers to fully retrace and spell out the different meanings that any one metaphor produces, rather than considering a metaphor in monolithic terms or simply accepting a metaphor for its vividness, beguiling connotations or some conceived likeness between the conjoined concepts at a surface level. An important direction for further research in this regard is for theorists and researchers to map and spell out the meaning of those metaphors that currently dominate organizational theorizing and research. Besides the ‘organizational identity’ meta-

phor that we have spelled out in some detail here, other metaphors, including the metaphors of 'chaos' (e.g. Thiétart and Forgues, 1995), 'organizational memory' (Walsh and Ungson, 1991) and 'jazz' (e.g. Zack, 2000), now readily qualify for such an exercise.

A third contribution of the image-schematic model is that it suggests a set of heuristics or judgmental rules in relation to the development, selection and use of metaphors. These heuristics follow from the position that the distinction between higher-order, semantic domains (and their image-schematic structures) and lower-level, instance-specific information is central to metaphor production and comprehension. Tourangeau and Sternberg (1982), Katz (1992), and Lakoff (1993) initially formulated these heuristics on the basis of experiments in which metaphors were found to be more apt and fitting, and to create stronger and more meaningful imagery, when they related concepts from more diverse or distant domains (between-domains distance), and when the correspondence between the tenor and vehicle concepts was conceived as more exact (within-domains similarity). The exactness between the tenor and vehicle concepts follows from the invariance principle discussed above and refers to the match between the image-schemata that are evoked when two concepts are correlated (Lakoff, 1993). The 'organizational identity' metaphor discussed above meets these two formulated rules. The vehicle concept of 'identity' is considered exact (in an image-schematic sense) to the target concept of 'organization' by many theorists and researchers (albeit in very different ways). Also, the semantic domains conjoined within the metaphor are considerably distant (i.e. the social world of organizations versus the psychological world of cognition, personality and identity formation). The 'organizational identity' metaphor, for these reasons, is considered 'apt' and has indeed forced theorists and researchers from different research communities to create resemblances between the conjoined concepts and their respective domains that did not seem particularly related beforehand. Building on from this example, the heuristics suggested by the image-schematic model – search for a high level of between-domains distance and within-domains similarity in metaphor – may, in a general sense, be useful to theorists and researchers in their selection and evaluation of metaphors in the organizational field. They may also help them harness the productive potential of metaphor for sparking off inquiry and for directing researchers to explore links that would otherwise remain obscure.

A fourth and more general contribution of the image-schematic model of metaphor is that its extended use, and the fuller understanding of metaphor that it will give, may also contribute to a more informed, guided, and generally more reflective use of metaphor by organizational theorists and researchers. That is, instead of leaving the role and use of metaphor implicit and intuitive, and thus inconsequential, a more explicit understanding of metaphor through the image-schematic framework would enable theorists and researchers to become more mindful and reflective of their own adoption and use of metaphors. Reflectivity, in this sense,



refers to an increased awareness and understanding of organizational theorists of their own theoretical assumptions and the metaphorical images that lay at the root of their work, and to spell these out together with the thought trials that they engage in (Johnson and Duberly, 2003). Such a reflective use of metaphor will not only be beneficial to the individual theorist who becomes more mindful of his/her own theorizing and of ways of improving it (cf. Weick, 1989, 1999), but also to the field of organization theory as a whole as it enables a more wholesome discussion and comparison of different theoretical positions and knowledge claims.

A final contribution of the image-schematic model of metaphor is that it questions whether knowledge development is a simple, linear process (Pfeffer, 1993) and rather suggests that it is a cultural project – that is, it is produced at a multiplicity of discursive sites, interspersed with different background assumptions, capacities, practices and resident knowledge of the community involved (see also Hassard and Kelemen, 2002; Maasen and Weingart, 2000). From this perspective, knowledge development, as we have shown, consists of a structured, yet unpredictable process based on the import and export of metaphors across research traditions and the locally specific processing of metaphors within them. This process is likely to be a non-linear one: each research tradition will give its own slant on a certain metaphor, which altogether makes for a diffuse and heterogeneous picture, and will also interact with each other in unforeseeable ways. The locally specific processing and interpretation of a metaphor furthermore suggests that although different research traditions may resonate with a single metaphor like ‘organizational identity’, the different meanings that they attach to it may make their respective accounts inconsistent, and perhaps even contradictory with one another. As such, theorizing and research that is based on metaphors may be fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions across research traditions, and may be difficult to synthesize and integrate at a higher level; at the level of the entire body of organization theory. In one sense, this may not be seen as problematic from the perspective of the local research tradition, where a metaphor becomes apt and useful when it is interpreted and integrated with the background assumptions, practices and resident knowledge of the research tradition involved. The currency of a metaphor will then be assessed in terms of the new insights and research pathways that it has contributed to theorizing and research within the local research tradition. At a more global level, however, the contradictions across research traditions, and the fundamentally different ways in which a single metaphorical concept is understood, may as mentioned be seen as problematic where such differences hinder the global accumulation and progress of knowledge. The analysis and discussion in this paper suggests that such a problem may indeed emerge as now seems to be the case with the ‘organizational identity’ metaphor. To this end, then, we pragmatically suggest that theorists and researchers need to use metaphors in a more informed and reflective way by using the image-schematic model to spell out the different meanings of a metaphor. They may then engage in debate on these different meanings,



and reflect whether these can be synthesized and integrated, or rather whether a plurality of meanings is fruitful or, indeed, inevitable.

## NOTES

\*This paper is part of a larger research programme (Metaphor, Theory and the Evolution of Knowledge on Organizations) supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK (RES-000-22-0791). I am grateful to Timothy Clark of the *Journal of Management Studies*, James Taylor, the participants in the 'organizational identity' colloquium at EGOS 2004 and the three reviewers for their valuable comments upon previous versions of the manuscript. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of Susanne Broekhuizen in the data collection.

[1] This point goes as far back as Aristotle, who in the *Rhetoric* considers metaphor interpretation as involving a comparison of objects or domains to determine what discrete properties or relations applying to one term can also apply to the other term in the same or a similar sense. Having said that, in some passages of the *Rhetoric* and in his *Poetics*, Aristotle ignores simile as the foundation of metaphor and instead, theorizes about the generative or constitutive effect of metaphor (see Ricoeur, 1977). In doing so, he effectively laid the ground for the interaction model of metaphor that was introduced by Black and further extended in cognitive science and psychology (see Tourangeau and Sternberg, 1982).

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