

Metaphor in Psychoanalysis: Bane or Blessing?

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Since the 1980 book, *The Metaphors We Live By*, by Lakoff and Johnson, the cognitive–linguistic view of metaphor that they propound has come to be most widely accepted. Its characteristic features are that (a) metaphor is a property of the concept, not the words; (b) its function is to heighten understanding, not simply artistic or aesthetic; (c) it is often *not* based on similarity; (d) it is ubiquitous in ordinary language, not requiring special talent; and (e) it is an inevitable intrinsic aspect of all human thought and language. This is true of all speech, including the speech in and of psychoanalysis. Metaphor both amplifies and creates meaning. But it can also be misleading and produce conceptual errors of meaning. It should, therefore, not be reified or always taken literally, but should remain flexible and alterable, so that heuristically more relevant and more encompassing metaphor can readily be elaborated.

THE MEANING OF METAPHOR

Our language of discourse, daily conversation, or literature and essay, has, as far back as it has been recorded, been saturated with metaphor. Zoltán Kövecses (2002), a student of and collaborator with the noted American linguist George Lakoff, in his comprehensive book on metaphor—called a *Practical Introduction*—calls metaphor a figure of speech that implies a comparison between two unlike entities, though with linking common features. He states that, traditionally, metaphor has had five characteristic features: (a) It is a property of words, a linguistic phenomenon; (b) it is used for rhetorical or artistic purposes; (c) it is based on resemblance; (d) it is a conscious and deliberate fashioning of words that requires special talent, quoting Aristotle, who called it “a mark of genius”; and, last, (e) a figure of speech that we can well do without.

This view Kövecses (2002) declares to be dramatically challenged, and in his view superseded, by the “cognitive–linguistic view of metaphor” enunciated in the 1980 volume by Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in which five quite different—and opposed—characteristic features define metaphor: (a) It is a property of the concept, not the words; (b) the function is to heighten understanding, rather than simply an artistic or aesthetic purpose; (c) it is often not based on similarity; (d) it is used effortlessly, and mostly unremarked, in ordinary language, not requiring any special talent; and (e) it is far from being a superfluous, though pleasing, linguistic ornament and is rather an inevitable, intrinsic aspect of human thought, reasoning, and speech.

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Although, admittedly, there may be strong proponents of both perspectives still continuing today, Kövecses (2002) devotes his entire volume to demonstrating, via seemingly endless examples, the clear superiority of the newer *cognitive–linguistic* perspective. The use of metaphor is so ubiquitous, and often so mundane and commonplace, that it is simply not noticed, being called in that case “dead metaphor.” Two such examples are, “a local *branch* of this business” (a plant metaphor of a tree), and “the country was close to *sliding* into war” (a spatial metaphor). But these are really “live metaphors” since they frame our thinking and give it meaning; they are the metaphors we regularly live by. For example, our common metaphor of the human mind as a machine can be seen in another two of Kövecses’ (2002) examples: “How could any man ever understand the *workings* of a woman’s mind?” or “After my first cup of morning coffee, my brain was *ticking over* much more briskly.” And this common metaphor is evident in all visions of mental activity, of mind conceived as computer for example, by scientist and general public alike.

In this perspective, metaphorical language is not arbitrary and unmotivated, nor simply ornamental, but is embedded in and central to our entire idea-creating, thinking process, originally arising from our basic bodily (sensorimotor) developmental experiences. And when we see ideas as food (“I can’t swallow that claim”) or life as a journey (“We aren’t getting anywhere”), we are thinking about abstract concepts (ideation, or life) in ways that are deeply facilitated by the more concrete concepts of food or a journey. In this sense, “in the cognitive–linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another [more concrete] conceptual domain” (Kövecses, 2002, p. 4). Thus, it creates new meaning.

Adam Bessie, in his 2006 review of the literature on metaphor, also drawing centrally upon Lakoff and Johnson, states then the specific contention that “metaphor is a foundational, constructive, and natural process by which we conceptualize the world” (p. 6), and is, therefore, “a process for generating ideas” (p. 5). Within this conception, “all language is, at some level, metaphoric . . . not a matter for the artist alone, but a part of everyday life” (pp. 10–11), and “a way of thinking, a way to invent ideas, rather than [just] a way to clearly express thinking” (p. 11). Metaphor has been moved, powerfully by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), from mental product to mental process.

Bessie (2006) quotes Peter Elbow (1973) on *how* metaphor generates new meaning. “When you make a metaphor you call something by a wrong name. . . . You are thinking in terms of something else. . . . [Each comparison] throws into relief aspects of the [topic] you might otherwise miss. You are seeing one thought or perception in terms of another” (Elbow, 1973, pp. 53–54). “In essence . . . the writer discovers similarity, and between things which are at first, seemingly unrelated” (Bessie, 2006, p. 13). And it is this “discovery process [that] is generative; the writer develops new ideas atop old ones, seeing the world in new ways” (p. 13).

This is what yields new insights, activating “two separate concepts, bridging the two separate conceptual schemata” (Bessie, 2006, pp. 21–22). And, of course, it also makes for the possibility of error. As James Seitz (1999) said, “Metaphor, in other words, represents language at its most vulnerable moment, not only because it stimulates multiple, unpredictable readings, but more importantly because it risks obfuscation that can result from calling *this* by the name of *that*” (p. 42, italics in original). Therefore, “the metaphoric process . . . is not only one of finding comparisons between different things but [can become one of] finding contrasts” (Bessie, 2006, p. 17). And, thus, it can also produce conceptual errors in our process of taking “what we know, to make sense of what we do not” (Bessie, 2006, p. 14). Metaphor can also be used, deliberately

or automatically, to influence, even to mislead, to further bias, and to advance ideology, as in political, economic, or cultural propaganda, or commercially, in product advertising. Examples are, of course, everyday, and legion.

And last, importantly, “Given theory which suggests [that] metaphor is a matter of individual cognition ‘difference’ becomes contextualized within the individual, rather than universally. Thus, determining when a topic and vehicle are ‘different’ and thus metaphoric, is a matter of individual perception, and individual knowledge” (Bessie, 2006, p. 18). In other words, “What is metaphoric to one person, can well be literal to another” (Bessie, 2006, p. 9).

FREUD AND METAPHOR

Given this state of metaphor theory, with its still continuing, varying perspectives, and its warning caveats on the pitfalls for the adherents of any of its perspectives, how can we situate the role and place of metaphor within psychoanalysis, both in its theory, and in its therapeutic applications, within that context? As is so often the case, Sigmund Freud can be understood on both sides of the just stated question. On the one hand, his descriptive–explanatory language is drenched in vivid metaphor, in both the clinical and the theoretical realms. A very well-known, and oft-remarked, clinical example is his analogy of the psychoanalytic situation to a train ride, and the emergent free associations of the analysand to the recital of a railroad passenger seated at the window, describing the passing scenery to the companion in the adjacent seat (Freud, 1913). An equally well-known and quoted theoretical statement is his effort to explain how sense-impressions relating to what he calls the perceptual system and the mnemonic systems become embedded memory through analogy with the operation of the then recently introduced contrivance of the “Mystic Writing-Pad,” a writing-tablet from which notes could be erased by an easy movement of the hand (Freud, 1925, p. 228). Every student of psychoanalysis has many more of Freud’s examples at hand.

However, given Freud’s commitment—under the guidance of his neuropathological mentor, von Brücke—to the Helmholtz model of a natural science, physico-chemical basis for biological processes, he espoused his lifelong conviction that psychoanalysis, as an evolutionarily constituted, biologically grounded, psychological discipline, would ultimately be firmly embedded in that same natural science framework. And, as corollary to that, would necessarily endeavor to eschew metaphorical language in favor of a more scientific mathematical language (a language direction in which Bion sought later to move, while himself at the same time creating new metaphoric concepts such as “container–contained”).

At the same time, Freud himself famously created numerous compelling metaphors, such as those just indicated, to describe his advancing theoretical conceptions, such as id, ego, and superego, used to describe differing mental activities—and to justify their heuristic use, as well as mark out his strong awareness of their provisional, and nonliteral, nature. I cite two of his best-known cautionary expressions. In his 1914 paper *On Narcissism*, he said:

I am of opinion that that is just the difference between a speculative theory and a science erected on empirical interpretation. The latter will not envy speculation its privilege of having a smooth, logically unassailable foundation, but will gladly content itself with nebulous, scarcely imaginable basic concepts, which it hopes to apprehend more clearly in the course of its development, or which

it is even prepared to replace by others. For these ideas are not the foundation of science, upon which everything rests: that foundation is observation alone. They are not the bottom but the top of the whole structure, and they can be replaced and discarded without damaging it. The same thing is happening in our day in the science of physics, the basic notions of which as regards matter, centres of force, attraction, etc. are scarcely less debatable than the corresponding notions in psycho-analysis [Freud, 1914b, p. 77].

In this pivotal paper, Freud (1914b) clearly defended the necessity of metaphoric conceptions to the advancement of psychoanalytic theorizing—and cited the quintessential natural science, physics, as also governed by comparable needs and strategies—while expressing the implied hope that this might be only a way-station on the road to more scientific, i.e. mathematical, precision.

And in his final years, in his 1937 paper, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, Freud still made the identical point, even more dramatically, when discussing the instincts and their relation to the ego:

If we are asked by what methods and means this result is achieved, it is not easy to find an answer. We can only say: “So muss denn doch die Hexe dran!”—the Witch Metapsychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said “phantasying”—we shall not get another step forward. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, what our Witch reveals is neither very clear nor very detailed. [p. 225]

And here is clearly stated the presence of—and the use of—metaphor as central to the fabric of psychoanalysis from its very beginnings as an emerging science, but also, its limitations, and its possibility for obfuscation.

THE STRUGGLE TO EXPUNGE METAPHOR FROM PSYCHOANALYSIS

Ever since, different theoreticians have thrown their weight on one or the other side of this struggle over the proper place, for better or worse, of metaphor within psychoanalytic conceptualizing. In the first decades after World War II—and prior to the path-changing Lakoff-Johnson (1980) volume—major theorists, concerned to make psychoanalysis more scientific, sought to progressively eliminate metaphor from its language. For example, Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1954), schooled in Vienna in the logical positivist teachings of Moritz Schlick, averred, “While the psychoanalytic system comes closer to a truly scientific theory than most observers realize, psychoanalysis still contains many metaphors, analogies, and confusions between construct and fact which must in the end be eliminated” (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1954). And she explained away such metaphoric, and in her mind, logical, lapses that appeared in Freud’s theorizing.

When Freud ascribes some of the difficulties in his speculations concerning the instincts to our being obliged to operate with ‘metaphorical expressions peculiar to psychology,’ we must add in his behalf that for the type of problems with which psychoanalysis deals the mentalistic (introspectionist or animistic) vocabulary constitutes the precise counterpart of the pictorial vocabulary which has been stressed as a legitimate or at least *tolerable* ingredient of the earlier stages of physical science [Frenkel-Brunswik, 1954, p. 226, italics added].

And H. J. Home (1966) warned of the danger of such lapses: “If mind is not a thing, then each time we speak about it as if it were a thing we are speaking metaphorically. . . . If, however, we suppress or repress our consciousness of the metaphor and speak literally about the mind as a thing then we have created a metaphysical fact” (p. 46), something to certainly be avoided.

It was under this antimetaphorizing banner that two major American psychoanalytic theorists undertook to expunge metaphoric language from psychoanalytic discourse, though from different perspectives, Lawrence Kubie from a theoretical vantage point, and Roy Schafer from a clinical one. Kubie (1966) undertook his campaign as the centerpiece of his effort to ground psychoanalysis within “the future development of a psychophysiology of psychoanalysis” (p. 196), in accord with Freud’s own dream of this future for the discipline that he had almost singlehandedly created. Kubie did acknowledge that he had, as yet, no methods to properly carry out this intent of a biologically grounded, i.e., truly scientific (in his sense), psychoanalysis. “Unhappily, we have as yet no precise methods by which to carry on such investigations. The development of appropriate techniques will constitute a major methodological breakthrough for all psychologies, but especially for psychoanalytic psychology” (Kubie, 1966, p. 196).

And in decrying both Freud’s topographic and structural metaphors, Kubie (1966) did endeavor to commit himself to the effort to expunge metaphorical language from psychoanalysis: “I will make no further use of this metaphor [topographic aspects of mentation], however, nor of certain other metaphors which appear currently in psychoanalytic writings, and which are regularly miscalled ‘hypotheses’” (p. 191). As an example of the ill that he felt was done by the widespread use of Freud’s structural metaphor of the mind (id–ego–superego), Kubie (1966) declared:

Freud called this the “structural” aspect of human mentation. This metaphor seems to me to have been even more unfortunate and misleading than the other [the earlier topographic model] because it does not increase the precision of our descriptions of mental processes, but blurs them by an inexact analogy, and also because it has no explanatory value itself. Indeed, the effort to use this analogy as an explanatory hypothesis has led us into a morass of anthropomorphic pseudo-explanations [p. 192].

Of such statements, Léon Wurmser (1977), who later wrote in defense of metaphor as central to the creation of (all) science, including psychoanalysis, declared, “But is a statement referring to ‘the characteristics of behavior in which preconscious processing flows freely, dominating the psychic stream and furnishing a continuous supply of processed experiences for ‘symbolic sampling’ . . . in any way less metaphorical than the points of view, the metaphors and models, attacked by him?’” (pp. 468–469).

It was, however, Roy Schafer who, from a clinical, rather than a theoretical, vantage point, mounted the most intense and prolonged effort, in a major sequence of papers (for instance, 1972, 1973, 1975) culminating in a book (1976), to thoroughly eliminate metaphor from psychoanalytic work by shifting concretizing nouns, and their qualifying adjectives, so often cast within a passive voice, into active verbs and their adverbs—all to be called *action language* (since the verbs would specify mental acts). This would restore the personal agency, and its inherent acceptance of personal responsibility, to personal behavior and its psychoanalytic unraveling. Schafer’s (1975) battle cry was, “We can no longer afford to maintain unchallenged the belief that there can be no Freudian psychoanalysis without Freudian metapsychology” (p. 41).

In this effort to rid psychoanalysis of all its spatial metaphors of the mind’s various functions, and their interplay and their movements inside and outside, Schafer (1972) declared,

I have been reexamining psychoanalytic terms in the interest of eliminating from our theory confusing, unnecessary, and meaningless metaphors and the assumptions they both express and generate. . . . I am . . . attempting to develop a sublanguage within the English language that will make it possible to specify mental facts in an unambiguous, parsimonious, consistent, and meaningful fashion: I refer especially to facts of interest to psychoanalysts and analysts [p. 421].

He does this because,

We have complicated our thinking unnecessarily; we are using a pseudospacial metaphor from which it is all too easy to slip into concreteness of thought; once embarked on metaphor, we tend to develop a sense of obligation to be metaphorically consistent, and to involve ourselves in extravagant niceties of formulation, and perhaps we even introduce still another assumption into theory where none is needed. The history of the pseudoquantitative energy metaphor in Freudian metapsychology demonstrates what I mean [Schafer, 1972, p. 435].

Schafer (1973) then went on to assert that, “Even though such archaic thinking is widely used as metaphor in the adaptive communications of everyday life, it *cannot* be used for exact clinical description and interpretation or for rigorous theoretical conceptualization” (p. 47, italics added). And this is because it cannot be tested:

There is no *it* that metaphors capture and so there is no way of testing the truth of a metaphoric construction of experience when one has only the metaphor to work with. Then it is self-contradictory to assert—it is so often asserted—that certain experiences can be expressed *only* metaphorically; for if the assertion is true, then there is no way of assessing the metaphor against its referent and so no basis for making the claim in the first place. (Schafer, 1976, p. 369)

That, in essence was Schafer’s message, which he kept enlarging in a series of papers seeming to cover almost every aspect of psychoanalytic conceptualizing.

That Schafer’s (1976) action language never won a significant constituency can be attributed, I think, to two reasons. First is the real ubiquity of metaphor in all our spoken language, whether in social or psychoanalytic discourse, as Lakoff and Johnson demonstrated so convincingly in 1980 (after the publication of the major bulk of Schafer’s writings on the subject), so that the effort to totally expunge metaphor becomes an unending, and always failed, task. And second, because the endless sample alternatives that Schafer offered so often were strained and clumsy locutions that could not come easily into conversation. For example, in a chapter in his 1976 book devoted to the language of emotion, after giving many striking and common examples of the metaphor of the heart used to describe emotional states (big-hearted, broken-hearted, warm-hearted, cold-hearted, and many more), Schafer offers substitutions like; “A warmhearted person is someone who deals affectionately and generously with others. A chicken-hearted person is one who fearfully avoids dealing with ordinary dangers. A hearty person is one who does a variety of things vigorously, zestfully, and good-humoredly,” etc. (p. 276).¹

¹Schafer’s cause did achieve significant literary support when Susan Sontag (1978), caught up with her own cancer, published a polemical essay decrying the dangers caused by the all-too-ready willingness to make mysterious and dreaded illnesses, like tuberculosis and cancer, and also others (leprosy, syphilis, and insanity) into “morally, if not literally contagious” (p. 6) happenings. With bountiful references from world literature, Sontag described the long romanticization of tuberculosis into an ailment of talented aesthetes, “the sign of a superior nature” (p. 34; e.g., Shelley and Keats), or cancer as a failure of expressiveness, reflecting the repression of violent feelings by life’s losers. “Contrariwise, my point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being

IN DEFENSE OF METAPHOR IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

But metaphor in psychoanalysis has also had its determined, early defenders, in both its clinical and theoretical arenas. Given its conversational ubiquity, working with, i.e., understanding, metaphor has long been part of the clinical armamentarium of psychoanalysis. Rudolf Ekstein and Dorothy Wright in the 1950s made explicit what Ekstein called *working within the metaphor*. In a 1952 article, they described a *schizophrenoid* child, a delusional nine year old, massively phobic, given to suicidal fantasizing, and troubled by severe asthma, who played out his psychic turmoil as a Five Star General, commanding an armada of space ships engaged in destructive intergalactic wars. He was labeled the “space child” because of the vast cosmological distances over which his internal wars with his all too powerful parents were presented.

Working within the metaphor was described as,

When we speak of distance we refer to it in the physical, emotional, metaphoric sense, since his way of describing the man far away, his using the metaphor of hundreds and thousands of light years seemed to be nothing but an allusion to a psychological problem which he could not present in any other way. The mode of his defense, the way his ego attempted to master internal problems rather than the content of the conflict was attacked by psychotherapeutic work [Ekstein and Wright, 1952, p. 214].

And after substantial therapeutic work, the child’s internal world was brought down from the distant galaxies to planet earth, where he now became Oscar Pumphandle, engaged in research in Arizona, improving the atom bomb, while his parents were also now earth-bound, but as dinosaurs (still distant in time). It was such changes, as in these mechanisms of distance, of space, and of time, that Ekstein felt could be taken as indicators of therapeutic progress. It was “defense through distance” (Ekstein and Wright, p. 222) that was gradually undone.

In a successor paper two years later, the boy was now solidly on earth but moving time over great spans through a time machine that he had created. He could now move from our primeval evolutionary birth from a fish or reptile, through all of history, favoring William the Conqueror’s 1066 conquest of England, and a trip as a tourist in Europe in 1425. His mission in going back in history was to intervene to change critical familial events, and thus by changing his past, saving his future. In this paper, entitled *The Space Child’s Time Machine* (Ekstein, 1954), the author stated that, “Tommy has made use of many archeological metaphors” (p. 505). Tommy’s delusional states could be conceptualized as experiencing concretized metaphors, literally, i.e., delusionally.

Clearly, work within the metaphor, or with the metaphor, is not always so explicit as with this very disturbed youngster, but more or less explicitly (or implicitly) it has long been an inevitable and accepted part of imaginative clinical psychoanalysis.² How could it be otherwise, given the

ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking” (p. 3). Rather than being the bearer of secret (and often shameful) taboos, disease is an “ineluctably material reality” (p. 56). And in a wholesale assault on any hint of psychosomatic thinking, “Psychological theories of illness are a powerful means of placing the blame on the ill. Patients, who are instructed that they have, unwittingly caused their disease are also being made to feel that they have deserved it” (p. 57). And that, of course, can be a danger of metaphor!

²For further striking examples of the use of flagrant metaphor in clinical psychoanalysis, the reader can consult Aleksandrowicz (1962), Reider (1972), and Voth (1970). For somewhat more theoretical conceptualizations, see Lewin (1970, 1971) and Sharpe (1940).

ubiquity of metaphor as an inextricable constituent of even the most ordinary language, let alone the usually more educated discourse within the psychoanalytic encounter. And it can be put to apt clinical use. When a patient expresses himself, for example, as hunting around for something, the alert analyst can at least wonder about buried aggressive connotations, hunting, hostile assaults, murderous fantasies, and so forth.

But the place of metaphor within the theoretical language of psychoanalysis, a discipline trying to warrant its claim to be a growing science, has always been more problematic—witness the efforts by theorists such as Kubie and Schafer, intent on ridding psychoanalysis of its metaphoric expressions, the one to legitimate its credentials as science by making its language ultimately more mathematical, and the other to enhance its power as therapy by making its clinical language more actively verbal and its agency more owned.

It was Léon Wurmser (1977)—also writing, like Kubie and Schafer, prior the publication of the Lakoff–Johnson (1980) volume, which retrospectively gave powerful support to Wurmser’s thesis—who impressively made the case for the inevitability and the necessity of metaphor as a central component of developing science. Wurmser began with a systematic critique of those who saw metaphor as either a distortion of the clinical process (e.g., Schafer) or an antiscientific turn (e.g., Kubie), in both ways declared to be hurtful to psychoanalysis. Wurmser’s response to Kubie, who he artfully showed was actually substituting one set of metaphors for another in the language of psychoanalytic theory—since, as Lakoff and Johnson later demonstrated, there is no escape from metaphor when constructing speech or writing—has already been earlier stated.

Of Schafer, Wurmser (1977) said:

As Schafer (1975) states in a recent article, his profound criticism would sweep away all of metapsychology and most of our clinical theory and erect a new theory based on psychoanalytic phenomenology. His criticism is based on two premises: first that metaphors derived from direct experience become concretized and therefore are dangerous, indeed ultimately evil;³ and second, that it is possible to form a theory of psychoanalysis based strictly on functional correlations which have shed all metaphorical impurities, and that he has found a key to build such a nonconcretized, nonreified theory [p. 471].

But again, “shedding all metaphorical impurities” is a fruitless task, and the substituted language proved clumsy and less attractive, and therefore never caught on.

Wurmser (1977) then went on to stake out his own defense of metaphor in psychoanalysis, both clinically and theoretically. Essentially, his argument is that “what is crucial is that our science, like any other science, is woven of the warp of observations and held together by the intricate woof of symbolism, of many layers of abstractions, of stark and faded metaphors, which ‘interpret’ for us (‘explain’ to us) the ‘direct’ facts which, as we know, are never really direct” (pp. 476–477). This led to the statement, all in italics: “*All science is the systematic use*

³The risks in concretizing metaphor, and taking it literally, can be very real and can do great harm. When I entered psychiatry in 1949, the lobotomy operation was still being employed for the mitigation of the psychotic structure in instances of severe, and chronic, paranoid schizophrenia. At a hospital lobotomy conference that I knew, the lobotomy was explained and justified by the conception that the ego resided in the frontal cortex, and the turbulent id in the thalamus, so that surgically severing the thalamo-cortical projections, would release the weakened ego from the tyranny of the overpowering, chaotic id. This formulation was advanced by the psychoanalytic consultant. An extreme and tragic instance of the risks of concretized metaphor!

of metaphor” (p. 477). This is further explained by: “Metaphors, taken literally, are unscientific. Metaphors, understood as symbols, are the only language of science we possess, unless we resort to mathematical symbols” (p. 483) (which latter, of course, Bion attempted prematurely).

Actually, this all follows ineluctably from the Lakoff–Johnson thesis that metaphor is of the very fabric of all language usage, even though as Bessie (2006, p. 7) has stated,

Across fields there is [still] a great deal of debate over what metaphor is, and how it functions. [And] ironically, or appropriately, metaphor is an abstraction, one which it is difficult to define without resorting to metaphor. . . . In fact, the very word metaphor, Seitz (1991) observes, “derives from a metaphor: to transfer, to carry” (p. 389).

Since metaphor is always there, the (scientific) interest of psychoanalysis in the use of metaphor in its clinical and theoretical discourse, “is, *whether and in what forms and on what levels we choose symbolic representations* for the specific experiences gained by the psychoanalytic method and the scientific inquiry based on this method” (Wurmser, 1977, p. 482). For, “The connection between symbol and fact is solely this functional relation. . . . A means to predict consequences” (Wurmser, 1977, p. 473). And Freud, whose dramatic and evocative prose style earned him the Goethe Prize for Literature, was so often masterful in his metaphoric language choices. Wurmser (1977) put it thus: “What has been most *fruitful* in analytic theory formation? One has only to read the works of Freud and a few other analytic theoreticians to discover that it was the richness and the systematic, coherent use of metaphorical constructs that added so much to our knowledge” (p. 484).

Freud, of course, was not always clear about how he deployed and used metaphor. Talking about Freud’s energy metaphor, designed to substantiate the economic viewpoint in metapsychology, Wurmser quoted, “Shope (1973) is probably right when he states that Freud saw the concept of energy not as metaphor, but as explanatory construct (p. 396); this should not hinder our re-evaluating it critically—accepting it as useful in the former, as most dubious in the latter meaning” (p. 487). Although the energy metaphor has been substantially abandoned by much of the psychoanalytic world, replaced now by heuristically more useful metaphor, Wurmser did try to explain its long appeal to Freud (and to many others) as follows: “The economic world in psychoanalysis is an attempt not to add yet a new physical content to those physical equivalent [energy in the natural sciences] but to establish metaphorically, by analogy, a *similar system ‘of quantitative relations of equivalence’*—some novel form of lawful correlation between emotional phenomena” (p. 486). And, of course, by now much of Freudian metapsychology of which the economic viewpoint was but one component, has been abandoned and replaced with more felicitous (i.e., more useful) conceptions. What are involved are continuing issues of judgment that try to find widening collegial resonance.⁴

At the New York University Institute of Philosophy chaired by Sidney Hook in 1958, devoted to an interchange between psychoanalysts (Hartmann, Kubie, Kardiner, Arlow) and philosophers of science, the philosopher Arthur Danto was one participant who spoke to the same issues as Wurmser, and made the same comparison with the queen science, physics:

⁴The earlier widely noted 1964 article by William Grossman and Bennett Simon made essentially the same argument as Wurmser (1977), but under the more narrowly focused conception of anthropomorphism in psychoanalysis, rather than Wurmser’s umbrella of metaphor.

A person who demands that every properly scientific term be redeemed (without remainder) with observational equivalents, merely betrays allegiance to a superannuated empiricism. It is hardly damaging any longer, therefore, to accuse psychoanalysis of being unscientific by virtue of its trafficking in unobservables. Providing that the theoretical terms function in psychoanalytical theories the way they do in (say) physical theories, and providing that psychoanalytical theories come up to the mark on syntactical grounds, the two could hardly be contrasted invidiously. So far as unobservableness goes, there is little to choose as between castration complexes and psi-functions” [Danto, 1959, p. 315].

CURRENT PSYCHOANALYTIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF METAPHOR

By now, the Lakoff–Johnson cognitive–linguistic perspective, quoted in most current psychoanalytic contributions to the subject of metaphor, has come to be our almost universally accepted conceptual bedrock. There have been two prior issues of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (2005, 2009) devoted to exploring the role, rather the centrality, of metaphoric thought to psychoanalysis, both issues edited by Alan Barnett and Montana Katz—with this article in this third issue, edited by Montana Katz. Both prior issues acknowledge the pioneering role of Arnold Modell in fashioning the current, very much broadened, psychoanalytic conceptions of metaphor as what has been variously called the *heart*, or the *currency*, of psychoanalysis—both of these words, themselves, metaphors. Modell, himself, has a central article in both of those journal issues (2005, 2009a) and is referred to as basic to their understanding by almost all of the other authors in those issues, including even one (Fred Levin, 2009) calling Modell his muse.

Building on the Lakoff–Johnson thesis about the central role of metaphor in all thought and language, Modell expanded this framework to conceive of metaphor as the linguistic *bridge* from body to mind, from its origin in the sensorimotor biological building blocks of language acquisition, to being the lifetime bridge between (often unconscious) feeling states and verbalized speech (knowledge). And the whole array of fellow authors in the second issue of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (2009) ranging from the self-declared neuro-psychoanalyst, Fred Levin, to the prominent relationist, Donnel Stern (2009), each in their own way, fully support Modell’s conceptions.

Some sample quotations will demonstrate this wide concordance of seeing metaphor as the “royal road” to meaning-making, underlying almost every central (psychoanalytic) linguistic conception, such as the understanding of the unconscious, affect, thought transference, dream, etc., even the whole of psychoanalysis itself. For example, “Metaphor is at the center of the construction of meaning” (Modell, 2009b, p. 93); “a modern understanding of metaphor as the way we initially process and articulate new concepts” (Aragno, 2009, p. 30); “metaphor. . . transfers meaning between dissimilar domains, and, through the use of novel recombinations, transfers meanings” (Barnett and Katz, 2009, p. 1). Transfer of meanings is, of course, the essence of transference, as several of the contributors point out, and, of course, of dreams as well. “Metaphorical thought—understanding one thing in terms of another—underlies and permeates dream-formation” (Aragno, 2009, p. 40), and “metaphor points to one thing while signifying something else, just as dreams point to their manifest content while meaning their latent thoughts” (Aragno, 2009, p. 41).

This brings us to the practical equation of the use of metaphor as the practically total explanation of the entire analytic process, in Modell’s (2009a) words, “the currency of the emotional mind” (p. 6); “it is fundamentally embodied and is not simply a figure of speech” (2009a, p. 68). This leads to the full equation: “In summary, contemporary analysts of all connections agree that analysis *is* a metaphoric process, and that the patient’s and the analyst’s metaphoric processes

and verbalized metaphors are essential for the transformations the analysand must undergo. This theoretical issue seems indisputable” (Rizzuto, 2009, p. 20). And even more encompassing is a summarizing statement by Aragno (2009),

With respect to metaphor, psychoanalysts are indisputably privileged. We dwell in the realm of metaphor; of tropes, synecdoche, and metonymy: of irony, hyperbole, allusion, and illusion; of vital enactment and corresponding dream; of symptom, demonstration, meaning, and story as metaphoric *events*. Metaphor fills the space and the situation (even before the meetings have begun!); it permeates the process, its stages, phases, and exchanges [p. 32].

Contrary voices in psychoanalysis, such as those of Kubie and Schafer, seem to have died away. And nowhere are the cautionary notes, like those of the cognitive–linguists or among analysts such as Wurmser, that metaphors can be poorly constructed, can point to irrelevant or false meanings, can thus obfuscate and derail psychoanalytic understanding, can even lend themselves to harmful interventions—whether in clinical interchange or in theoretical construction—at all mentioned. Nor is much specific attention paid—aside from conventional metaphors that are broadly based, quite universally self-evident, and with consensually agreed-upon meanings—to the specific individual contextualization of metaphoric meanings, that though clearly central to understanding individual therapeutic interchange, may create real difficulties in facilitating theoretical advance that is meant to be universally applicable and consensually understood.

And beyond all this, what the contributors to *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (2005, 2009) have done is to push the (by now) quite well accepted conviction that our language, in all its dimensions, is (almost) automatically and inextricably, saturated with metaphor (both conventional, and in more creative minds, quite idiosyncratic), pushed this to the contention that all of abstract thought, is necessarily metaphoric, that abstraction cannot be conceptualized except metaphorically. Thus, metaphor could become properly declared by Modell the bridge from the latent unconscious thought to verbalized speech. This carries the risk, to me, of making every thought and every speech act, other than the exactly literal, into metaphor, and, in so doing, making metaphor itself, lose its special distinctness of meaning. To me, this can be beyond the Lakoff-Johnson (1980) thesis, and it strips metaphor of an essential element, that metaphor makes an *abstraction* more understandable in terms of something more *concrete*—with all the potential dangers then, of course, of leading to reification, to potential risk, and also to possible misunderstanding, because of individually different contextualization. To me, this overall broadening trend both overburdens the conception of metaphor and conceals its limitations and hazards.

WHERE DO I STAND?

I first became explicitly involved in considering the place and the meaning of metaphor in psychoanalysis when I gave my Presidential Address to the International Psychoanalytical Association (Wallerstein, 1988) in Montreal in 1987, and chose as my topic the issue of our increasing psychoanalytic diversity, or *pluralism*, as we had come to call it, a pluralism of theoretical perspectives, of linguistic and thought conventions, of distinctive regional, cultural, and language emphases; and what it was, in view of this expanding diversity, that still held us together as common adherents of a shared psychoanalytic science and profession.

After reviewing, in some detail, Freud’s own lifetime strenuous efforts to define the parameters of his new science of the mind, and to hold it together as a theoretically unified enterprise, against

both destructive or diluting pressures or seductions from without, and also against fractious human divisiveness from within, I outlined how this effort broke down, even in Freud's lifetime, with the emerging Kleinian movement in Great Britain, and then spread with other new theoretical perspectives emerging around the world, leading to the multiple competing metapsychologies we were facing at the time of my address in 1987—and continuing still today.

To respond to the question that I had posed—of what, in the face of this, still held us together—I took as my starting point the distinction posited for psychoanalysis by George Klein (1976), between the low-level and experience-near clinical theory, dealing with the actual observables in the interactions within the consulting room, and the more encompassing, more generally explanatory, and more causally developmental accounting of mental life from its earliest fathomable origins, the experience-distant general theories (or metapsychologies) that seek to explain the clinical phenomena described by the clinical theory. Although Klein declared the clinical theory to be eminently testable, he stated that the canons of correspondence between the clinical theory and our varying general theories were too tenuous to be able to claim any possibility of establishing utility or validity for any of the general theories, and that, indeed, the general theories were anyway all unnecessary to psychoanalytic understanding, and should, therefore, be severed and cast out by an action he dubbed *theorectomy*. This, of course, was our entire realm of differing metapsychologies, the Freudian ego psychological (now, modern conflict theory), the British object relational, the Kleinian, Bionian, Lacanian, Kohutian self-psychological, relational, etc.

I illustrated this contention with a vignette, described by Kohut, of a specific clinical interchange in which three theoretical explanatory systems, the Kleinian, the ego psychological, and Kohut's own self psychological, could each be invoked and could each be used to differently causally explain that same clinical interaction, each putting the clinical specifics into a different framework of plausible meaning, within an overall theoretical explanatory context. And each of these general explanatory systems would, indeed, be persuasive to the adherents of that viewpoint of who, in fact, would look at it as the most useful and natural way in which to understand the described clinical interaction.

What Kohut made of this was that the described clinical context was insufficient to decide which of the three interpretations would be, in this instance, closest to the mark, and so he called all three of them examples, potentially, of *wild analysis*—until proven otherwise. What I was differently suggesting was that our data are the clinical events of the consulting room, and that their interpretation, which could carry consensually agreed meaning, was embedded only in our clinical theory, the theory level of transference and countertransference, of resistance and defense, of conflict and compromise; in fact, the original fundamental elements of Freud's 1914 definition of psychoanalysis.⁵ This I stated to be our common psychoanalytic clinical ground that united us within our shared discipline.

⁵Freud (1914a) stated there, "the facts of transference and of resistance. Any line of investigation which recognizes these two facts and takes them as the starting point of its work has a right to call itself psycho-analysis, even though it arrives at results other than my own. But anyone who takes up other sides of the problem while ignoring these two hypotheses will hardly escape a charge of misappropriation of property by attempted impersonation, if he persists in calling himself a psycho-analyst" (p. 16). Of course, I must add here that the key words *transference* and *resistance* also imply the concepts of the unconscious, of psychic conflict, and of defense and compromise formation, the key building stones of our shared psychoanalytic edifice. And, of course, modern conceptions of the place and use of countertransference must be included. Further along in this *History*, Freud (1914a) elaborates this same definitional statement, using much the same words.

I also suggested that our pluralism of theoretical perspectives, within which we try to give overall meaning to our clinical data in the present, and try to reconstruct the past out of which the present developed, represent the various scientific metaphors that we have created to satisfy our variously conditioned needs for closure and coherence and overall theoretical explanation. Joseph and Anne-Marie Sandler had earlier (1983) approached this same conception in their statement that deep interpretations into the infantile past could be viewed as but metaphoric reconstructions. For example,

It is our firm conviction that so-called “deep” interpretations can have a good analytic effect only because they provide metaphors that can contain the fantasies and feelings in the second system [what they called the *present unconscious*]. The patient learns to understand and accept these metaphors, and if they provide a good fit, both cognitively and affectively, then they will be effective. This view gives us a way of understanding the interpretive approach of some of our [Kleinian] colleagues [Sandler and Sandler, 1983, p. 424].

I broadened and extended this thinking to the conception that all our general theoretical perspectives, Kleinian, but also ego psychological, and all the others, are but our varyingly chosen explanatory *metaphors*, heuristically useful to us in terms of our varying intellectual value commitments, in explaining, i.e., in making sense of, the primary clinical data of our consulting rooms, the realm of the present unconscious in the Sandler’s terms, or the realm of our clinical theory in George Klein’s terms. Put most simply, this conceptualization makes all our grand general theory (and all our pluralism of general theory), nothing but our individually chosen array of metaphor.

Put this way, my conception of the place of metaphor in psychoanalysis, though within the framework propounded linguistically by Lakoff and Johnson, of its inextricable ubiquity in all our thinking and verbalization processes, is less broad than its equation with the totality of the psychoanalytic process—itself very refractory to consensually agreed definition, with so many stating that, in judging case presentations, they find it hard to try to define the process, but they just know it when they see it—and is rather something less automatic, less totalistic, but rather something more personal, more individually constructed, more idiosyncratically determined, by our own developmental and personality dispositions, and the outlooks on life that they embed.

A similar view that life values are distinctly involved in our choice of theoretical perspectives, i.e., our scientific metaphors, was clearly articulated by John Gedo (1984), though perhaps not in a form with which we would all agree. He said on this issue:

Each of these conceptual schemata [the various psychoanalytic theoretical systems] encodes one or another of the primary meanings implicit in human existence—unfortunately, often to the exclusion of all other meanings. Thus, the view of man embodied in the libido theory, especially in the form it took prior to 1920, attributed primary significance to the satisfaction of the appetites. By contrast, Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic system teaches the need to make reparation for man’s constitutional wickedness. . . . In the 1970s, Heinz Kohut promulgated views that give comparable emphasis to the unique healing power of empathy while acknowledging man’s entitlement to an affectively gratifying milieu. . . . Let me hasten to add that I am emphatically in agreement with the need to satisfy appetites, to curb human destructiveness, and to provide an affectively gratifying environment for our children. And I am for other desiderata to boot! Isn’t everyone? [Gedo, 1984, p. 159].

Which is exactly my point extended to the role of metaphor. Our chosen explanatory metaphors are not inherent and automatic in our thought and speech construction, but are to significant

extent chosen (and so often, very thoughtfully and deliberately chosen) in terms of the personality predilections that we have—individually and differently—come to live by.

This same point of Gedo's, that our theoretical positions in psychoanalysis, i.e., our chosen scientific explanatory metaphors, are inevitably embedded in our fundamental social, political, and moral value dispositions, has been made strongly as the closing statement in Greenberg and Mitchell's 1983 book on object relations perspectives in (American) psychoanalysis, which they traced developmentally and historically through critical discussion of the work of the various major object relations theorists, starting with such diverse contributors as Melanie Klein, W. R. D. Fairbairn, and Harry Stack Sullivan. The summarizing point that they make at the end of their book is that the drive theory perspective and the relational theory perspective are linked to differing views of the essential nature of human experience and acquired world view.

Drive theory they linked philosophically to the positions of Hobbes and Locke, that man is an essentially individual animal, and that human goals and satisfactions are fundamentally personal and individual. The role of the state rests on the concept of *negative liberty*, that the state adds nothing to individual satisfaction as such, but just ensures the possibility of personal fulfillment. Relational theory they linked philosophically to the position of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, that man is an essentially social animal and that human goals and satisfactions are realizable only within an organized community. The role of the state rests here on the concept of *positive liberty*, to provide an indispensable positive function by offering its citizens that which they cannot provide for themselves in isolation.

Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) stated in relation to this that, "The drive/structure and the relational/structure model embody these two major traditions within Western philosophy in the relatively recently developing intellectual arena of psychoanalytic ideas" (p. 402). And in this context they quoted Thomas Kuhn (1977), the well-known philosopher and historian of (natural) science, that, "communication between proponents of different theories is inevitably partial. . . . What each takes to be facts, depends in part on the theory he espouses, and . . . an individual's transfer of allegiance from theory to theory is often better described as *conversion* than as choice" (p. 338, italics added). This is my own overall point, that we can and do choose different, and conflicting, explanatory metaphors to explain the same phenomena, the same facts, even what we take to be the facts, that we are endeavoring to explain.

Within this overall context, I see our present day theoretical pluralism, our, to this point, diversity of explanatory metaphors, arising out of our different life experiences, our different personality predilections, and our different psychoanalytic trainings and allegiances, as an expression of our current state of development as a credible science. Each metaphoric explanatory system represents, for its adherents, the best possible current understanding of the phenomena displayed in our consulting rooms, and is therefore heuristically useful, even essential, to the followers of that system. In that sense, these varying explanatory metaphors are vital to the current position of psychoanalysis as an evolving science, seeing the place of metaphor, of course, in a less totalistic way than others who view it more broadly as the vital coin of the entire psychoanalytic process, as in fact, the indubitable engine of all of psychoanalysis. That argument I leave aside, as I affirm what I regard as the central and essential role of metaphor in all scientific theory construction.

I don't, of course, expect that psychoanalysis will simply remain in this current state. Psychoanalysis is, rather, a continually evolving scientific endeavor. I have in two previous

publications (Wallerstein, 2002a, 2002b)—the first, talking about the growth and transformations over time of American ego psychology, and the second, an effort to prognosticate what I saw to be the continuing course of evolving converging trends within our currently pluralistic metapsychological (metaphoric) international psychoanalytic world—recounted the efforts of many clinical and theoretical contributors (most explicitly Kernberg and Sandler, but also Chodorow, Gabbard, Gill, Loewald, etc.) to reconcile—even creatively amalgamate—disparate metapsychologies and their dominant metaphors. These efforts, anchored at the clinical level, but aspiring upward toward the general explanatory level of metaphor, represent unifying trends, which to the extent that they mature, in consensually acceptable ways, will necessarily also lead to increasingly more encompassing (and, hopefully, more precise) explanatory metaphors. (The reader is referred to my two 2002 articles for a detailed exposition of the development, the then current status, and the expected near-future developments of these converging psychoanalytic perspectives.)

How far such unifying tendencies—with the concomitantly enlarging explanatory metaphors—will progress, is unclear, but they are similar to the unifying thrust of all science, even the paradigmatic science, physics, where an entire current generation of theoretical physicists are pursuing, via the promise of (super)string theory, the effort to create a theory of everything (T.O.E.). T.O.E. would finally unite two current major theoretical structures, Einstein's relativity theory, which explains so well the very large world of cosmology (galaxies, the expanding universe, space and time), and quantum mechanics, which explains equally well the very tiny world of subatomic particles (quarks, mesons, gluons, etc.), with the dilemma being—somewhat akin to that of psychoanalysis—that the two theories, of the very large and the very small, though each presumably valid in its own domain, stand in total opposition to each other, with—in physics—the situation, that if the one theory is correct, the other must be false.⁶ How far psychoanalysis will progress in this direction is clearly not, at present, knowable. Sciences do, incrementally, evolve, though at different rates, and varyingly toward a more precise (nonmetaphorical) language of mathematical equations and symbolisms. It is certainly an open question as to how far each science can (or should) evolve from the language of metaphor to the language of mathematics. Certainly none are wholly there now, and psychoanalysis is very far, indeed.

Finally, in terms of the whole tenor of the argument that I have been advancing through this article, the question in my title seems somewhat misplaced. Since metaphor is an integral component of the construction of language, all language, even the language of science, the issue is rather that although metaphor can indeed be misleading, and a bane, if it is concretized and reified and taken literally, it is indeed (most often) a blessing when aptly created, in the sense of imparting (and explaining) new meanings which advance our scientific understandings. And, as Freud counseled us at our very beginning, metaphor is intrinsically both flexible and alterable, so that heuristically more relevant and more encompassing metaphor can readily be elaborated. Thus, scientific propositions advance toward greater explanatory comprehensions, and ultimately, testability.

⁶For a detailed explanation of this situation in physics, I refer the reader to the two general explanatory books by the Columbia University theoretical physicist and string theory researcher, Brian Greene (1999, 2004).

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