Metaphor in management and organization theory: Evolution and criticism

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An orienting definition

A metaphor, most broadly, is “the application of a name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary 2004). In this paper, the origins of the use of metaphor in management and organization theory (M/OT) are traced through to present day. Early literature exposing and defending the use of metaphor is examined in conjunction with a series of critical reactions. Examples of how metaphor has been used in both educational and analytical settings after this exploratory period are presented. Lastly, contemporary analyses of the role of metaphor in M/OT (exhibiting both positive and negative views) are presented and critiqued in the context of their origins.
Metaphor in management and organization theory: An overview

The evolution of the literature on metaphor in management and organization theory displays an interesting pattern. In the 1980s, Gareth Morgan was the seminal ‘pro-metaphor’ author on the subject, exposing metaphors used in the earliest theories of management and providing evidence of their usefulness. This work was quickly followed by the persistent criticism of Craig C. Pinder and V. Warren Bourgeois (1982; 1983), who claimed that the use of metaphor served to obscure understanding of organizational dynamics and resulted in spurious explanations of organizational behaviour. Pinder and Bourgeois championed a scientific literal approach to understanding organizations. Their arguments lay in interpreting metaphors literally and using this as evidence of their poor fit for explaining management theories. Following the flurry of literature by these two opposing camps, often directly in response to one another (e.g. Pinder and Bourgeois 1982; Morgan 1983), a body of discourse that experimented with the use of metaphor in more depth (e.g. Hatch and Yanow 2008) was produced. The scholar’s perspective at this time was that the use of metaphor was acceptable and established in management and organization theory, largely based on the work of Morgan (Heracleous and Jacobs 2008b, 49). This motivated the use of more, as well as more complex, metaphors, as tools to understand and apply management and organization theory. According to Cornelissen,

[the role of metaphor within organization studies cannot be dismissed as sheer embellishment or as rhetorical alternative for what could be otherwise be framed and understood in literal, less ambivalent, and generally more explicit terms. Metaphor carries semantic baggage and involves multiple projections...and its infusion into organization theory is therefore purposeful in that a metaphor does (or does not) provide for fresh, and previously non-existent, insights into the reality of organizational life (Cornelissen 2004, 705-706).

The use of metaphor as an educational tool to explain M/OT also emerged at this time. Following this application-motivated discourse, literature that took an analytical ‘meta-’ approach to understanding the use of metaphor in M/OT was initiated by Cornelissen, whose stance is similar to that of Morgan but offers a more modern perspective on the use of metaphor. Again, this work has been met by significant opposition and alternative proposals,
this time from Oswick, Jones and their co-authors Keenoy and Grant.

The early opposing camps: Morgan versus Pinder and Bourgeois

Morgan’s initial analysis of metaphor in management and organization theory essentially justified the existence, and moreover the utility, of using metaphor to understand organizations and their dynamics. Some of his most influential work was the identification of the early metaphors to dominate M/OT (many of which are still consistently used). The major metaphors he identified are: organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination (Morgan 2006). Morgan even went so far as to state that “words, names, concepts, ideas, facts, observations etc., do not so much denote external ‘things,’ as conceptions of things activated in the mind by a selective and meaningful form of noticing the world” (1980, 610, emphasis added). Every linguistic or conceptual tool that we use to understand the world is thus a metaphor (in this vein, the concept of an ‘organization’ is itself a metaphor, as is the notion of ‘management’). In early research, metaphor was considered a basic, essentially static, building block or “creative form” (Morgan 1980, 610) to promote understanding.

The M/OT metaphors proposed by Morgan were based on his analysis of existing M/OT literature produced by significant management theorists. The “organization as machine” metaphor is present in the work of Henri Fayol, Max Weber and Taylor (Morgan 2006, 369-374). For example, in his scientific approach to management, Taylor (1911) suggests that the work performed by each employee could be isolated and selectively improved to increase the productivity of the organization as a whole, much as improving the quality of a single part in a machine would improve its overall function. Similarly, Morgan’s “organization as organism” metaphor can be traced back to the contributions of Spencer on organizational theory, as well as to more recent work on biological concepts in organization theory (Morgan 2006, 375).

1 “The state of being organized in a biological sense was the basis of the metaphor of arranging or coordinating in a general sense and of a body, system, or society in a general sense. Use of the term “organization” to depict a social institution is fairly modern, and creates new meaning of this work through metaphorical extension of older meanings” (Morgan 1980, 610).
In addition to confirming the frequency of metaphor in M/OT, Morgan offered some early explanations as to why metaphor is successful as a conceptual frame. He proposed that,

metaphor turns imagination in ways that forge an equivalence or identity between separate elements of experience. Specifically, metaphor creates meaning by understanding one phenomenon through another in a way that encourages us to understand what is common. Thus the idea that “the organization is a machine” finds machine-like qualities in organization...Metaphor makes meaning in a primal way; its role is not just embellishment (Morgan 1983, 602).

Morgan also provided basic guidelines for a ‘good’ metaphor: “The creative potential of metaphor depends upon there being a degree of difference between the subjects involved in the metaphorical process... it requires of its user a somewhat one-sided abstraction in which certain features are emphasized and other suppressed in a selective comparison” (Morgan 1980, 611).2

Interestingly, one conclusion of Morgan’s analysis of the prevalence of metaphor in M/OT is that “the discipline of organization theory has been imprisoned by its metaphors” (Morgan 1980, 605). This is a contradictory statement on his part, given his assertion above regarding the value of metaphor. However, he justifies his perception of the imprisonment factor of metaphor with his suggestion that the,

logic of metaphor...has important implications for organization theory, for it suggests that no one metaphor can capture the total nature of organizational life. A conscious and wide-ranging theoretical pluralism rather than an attempt to forge a synthesis upon narrow grounds emerges as an appropriate aim. (1980, 612).

Because much of the literature using metaphor as a tool for M/OT does not address the need for multiple perspectives, and thus multiple metaphors, to fully grasp the complete dynamics of a setting or management approach, scholars do in fact become trapped within their own metaphors and their analysis of them. Such scholars include Morgan’s scholarly rivals, Pinder and Bourgeois.

Pinder and Bourgeois fall prey to exactly that which Morgan cautioned against, when he notes that taking “traditional approaches” necessarily means that “the metaphorical nature of the image which generated (well-tried) concepts is lost from view, and the process of organizational analysis becomes over-

2 The concept of ‘process’ remains a significant aspect of metaphor through to the contemporary literature.
concretized as theorists and researchers treat the concepts as a description of reality” (Morgan 1980, 612). Pinder and Bourgeois attempted to undermine both the acceptability of metaphor in M/OT and Morgan’s explanations of the valuable components of metaphor by purposefully taking an overly literal approach to metaphors used in M/OT:

As an example, we offer Cohen, March, and Olsen’s (1972) garbage can metaphor, largely because it is one of the most colorful of those used in the discipline. When it is stated that decision-making processes in organizations often resemble the contents found in garbage cans (or at least the processes of filling and dumping them), one is not sure, exactly, how far or seriously to interpret the trope. It is possible, for example, to consider myriad dimensions of garbage cans, such as their size, shape, and color, whether they have handles or lids, whether they leak or are water tight, and how much they smell (Pinder and Bourgeois 1982, 643).

Pinder and Bourgeois also ignore, or are unaware of, Morgan’s (1980) crucial recognition that the value of metaphor depends on the target domain (the image used as the metaphor) having but a few qualities in common with the source domain, because otherwise the metaphor “produces either nonsensical or weak imagery” (Morgan 1980, 611). They caution that, “the danger in using metaphors is that we may not notice that the object being metaphorically described does not share many, if any, defining characteristics of the object used metaphorically” (Pinder and Bourgeois 1982, 643). Weakening their argument further, Pinder and Bourgeois provide incorrect examples of M/OT metaphors as evidence supporting their position: “Without caution… similes may become metaphors (‘organizations with certain characteristics are biological organisms’), and the trope begins to be taken too literally” (1982, 645, original emphasis). They hold to their position despite their (Pinder and Bourgeois 1982) recognition that “it is virtually impossible to eschew metaphors in regular discourse” and that their own work is “replete with them” (641).

The fundamental weakness in Pinder and Bourgeois’ criticism of metaphor in M/OT is that they are assuming that metaphors are being used as part of a scientific approach to M/OT which attempts to make predictions and provide evidence for theories, resulting in a “science laced with metaphors” (Pinder and Bourgeois 1982, 644). In contrast, the majority of metaphors in M/OT are used figuratively (as they should be) to promote understanding of a system by stimulating critical thinking, but not to predict how an organ-
ization will develop or explain its behaviour in its entirety. The next section introduces and describes a few M/OT metaphors used in this capacity.

Post-Morgan literature has ‘fleshed out’ the metaphors used in M/OT

After the published debates between Morgan and Pinder and Bourgeois, of which the outcome was a realization that the use of metaphor in M/OT is not only acceptable, but also useful, a great number of scholars began publishing their analysis of management and organization settings using metaphor. This body of literature has grown to be quite extensive, and so a few exemplary pieces will be discussed here, which serve to highlight the alternative ways metaphor has been incorporated into M/OT. More specifically, the primary settings for metaphor have been both educational and analytical. Metaphors have been used as tools to improve communication in organizations and to convey M/OT concepts to students. Metaphor is also used to explain within-organization dynamics and/or management behaviour.

For example, Taber (2007) presents his work on using metaphor to teach organization theory to business students. He “felt that metaphor writing could be used as a tool for management students to discover their subjective meanings and mental models of organizations and to serve as a medium for expressing those meanings” (Taber 2007, 541). Like Morgan, Taber emphasizes the need for “a variety of viewpoints” when studying organizations and thus, the need for more than one metaphor (2007, 543-544) because “a particular theory is a form of metaphor” (Taber 2007, 553).

In a similar manner, Heracleous and Jacobs (2008a) use so-called “embodied metaphors” or “physical constructions that can be touched, moved, examined from various angles and serve as engaging occasions for sense making” (309) to assist employees in understanding the dynamics of their workplace. During a management retreat they provided participants with building toy sets and had them build a representation of their workplace following a change of ownership. The result was a single “grand metaphor” and four “constituent metaphors” that represented employees’ perception of how their workplace would be impacted by the ownership change. The result was the use of metaphor as, “an intervention device to facilitate a variety of organization processes,” including strategy
development (319). Heracleous and Jacobs (2008a) conclude that “the process of crafting and decoding embodied metaphors can deliver insights and potential shifts in managers’ mind-sets that would have been difficult to attain in more conventional, numbers-driven, board-meeting style sessions” (320-321).

Lastly, a contemporary example of using metaphor to explain organizational dynamics can be found in Hatch and Yanow (2008). They propose that, differences in painting modes, considered metaphorically, can enable organizational scientists to more fully recognize how their philosophical presuppositions shape the definitions of concepts, the framing of research questions, and the selections of methods for examining organizational phenomena. (Hatch and Yanow 2008, 24)

In their analysis of figurative and gestural painting, they conclude that “in much the same way that figurative and gestural modes of painting produce contrasting kinds of images...two research methodologies in the social sciences [specifically, organizational studies] produce contrasting kinds of empirical research” (Hatch and Yanow 2008, 29). They use this metaphor to complete an analysis of objectivist-realist and constructivist-interpretive thinking in organizational study.

Contemporary discourse on the use of metaphor in M/OT: Cornelissen versus Oswick et al.

An extension of Morgan, who proposed a “one-sided abstraction” as the core of a metaphor, Cornelissen suggests that the process of using a metaphor has a conceptual impact on the source as well as the target domain (Cornelissen 2004). He explains that “in interpreting a metaphor, we infer an abstract ground for it, and this ground does not consist of shared features previously associated with the tenor and vehicle, but is something new all together“ (Cornelissen 2004, 709). He coins this “new” structure the “blend” and proposes that “there is new meaning in the blend that is not a composition of meanings that can be found in either the tenor [source] or vehicle [target] domains” (Cornelissen 2004, 712). Interestingly, Cornelissen recalls Pinder and Bourgeois’ (1982) requirement that metaphors have a “heuristic value for organizational theorizing” (Cornelissen 2004, 706), and argues that “a metaphor’s heuristic value comes from the two terms or entities (and their respective domains) that it conjoins
and the new light that it casts on a specific target subject” (Cornelissen 2004, 706).

Cornelissen’s main contribution to the theory of metaphor use in M/OT is the “correspondence” model of metaphor, developed in contrast to the “comparison” model of metaphor traditionally used. Briefly, he argues that “metaphoric understanding is creative, with the features of importance being emergent” (2004, 708) and,

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 constituents...A simpler comparison model, as Morgan (1983) likewise pointed out, misses this interactive process of ‘seeing-as’ or ‘conceiving-as’ by which an emergent meaning complex is generated” (Cornelissen 2004, 709).

Lastly, Cornelissen directly addresses the fact that metaphors are not to be taken literally, but that this does not depreciate their value: “the emergent structure [of a metaphor], although ‘fantastic’ from a literal interpretation point of view... is supremely efficient for the purpose of transferring the intended inferences back to the target input, and thereby making real-world inferences about the natural and dynamics of organizational life” (Cornelissen 2004, 716).

Cornelissen’s main contemporary critics are Cliff Oswick, Philip Jones, and co-authors David Grant and Tom Keenoy. Oswick et al. (2002) take an ontological approach to analyzing metaphor. Their primary criticism is that using metaphor limits the scope of thought applied to an analytical problem: “we are presented with many ways of thinking about organizations, but only one way of thinking about metaphors” (294) while “the emphasis on middle-range similarity is intuitively conservative and, thus, cognitively prescriptive rather than liberating” (298). Oswick et al. (2002) find it problematic that “if we wish to better understand a concrete domain by juxtaposing it with an abstract one we should primarily concern ourselves with aspects of sameness, rather than difference”. In short, they propose that other tropes (such as synec-
doche or irony) are more useful analytical linguistic tools than metaphor. Significantly, Oswick et al. (2002) consider the ‘comparison’ model of metaphor, disregarding Cornelissen’s ‘correspondence’ model and claim that metaphor “merely makes the ‘familiar more familiar’” (295). Oswick and Jones (2006) later criticize Corelissen’s ‘correspondence’ model, claiming that it relies on the, “same process of comparison of which [Cornelissen] is so dismissive” (483), but do not propose an alternative approach.

A modern perspective

The definition of metaphor has changed significantly since scholars first analyzed its use in-depth. Current explanations of metaphor indicate that it is more akin to a process than a static concept. This is especially true of metaphor as described by Cornelissen, who refers to “metaphorical work” (Cornelissen 2006, 486) and is supported by contemporary examples of the use of metaphor in M/OT such as Heracleous and Jacobs (2008a), who emphasized that when “crafting embodied metaphors...participants actively and collectively create a representation of their strategic territory” (310).

Despite these differences through time, the form of criticism Morgan encountered in the 1980s and that Cornelissen is currently addressing are significantly similar. Both Morgan and Cornelissen (both pro-metaphor scholars) present novel approaches to the use of metaphor in M/OT that contradict earlier forms of understanding, resulting in a revolt by scholars who hold opposing, more traditional views. Specifically, criticism of metaphor continues to rely on taking an extremely literal approach to analyzing a metaphor. A contemporary example is Andersen’s (2008) article, “An organization called Harry,” in which he concludes that “the notion of “Harry’s cognition” raises critical questions regarding concepts and empirical evidence. The concept of cognition requires the concept of a brain. If we know of no brain other than the human one, then organizations do not have brains” (Andersen 2008, 184). Just as Pinder and Bourgeois, and later Oswick et al., have done, Andersen is ignoring the crucial aspect of this metaphor, that it is a metaphor, and thus is unable to take advantage of its value.
References


