Metaphors make the world

Benjamin Santos Genta has and interesting piece in *Aeon*:

> *‘Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.’*
> *— from the essay ‘The Poet’ (1844) by Ralph Waldo Emerson*

> *‘Metaphors … become more literal as their novelty wanes.’*
> *— from the book Languages of Art (1976) by Nelson Goodman*

If Ralph Waldo Emerson was right that ‘language is fossil poetry’, then metaphors undoubtedly represent a significant

portion of these linguistic remnants. A particularly well-preserved linguistic fossil example is found in the satirical TV show *Veep*: after successfully giving an interview designed to divert the public's attention from an embarrassing diplomatic crisis, the US vice-president – portrayed by the outstanding Julia Louis-Dreyfus – comments to her staff: 'I spewed out so much bullshit, I'm gonna need a mint.'

When used properly, metaphors enhance speech. But correctly dosing the metaphorical spice in the dish of language is no easy task. They 'must not be far-fetched, or they will be difficult to grasp, nor obvious, or they will have no effect', as Aristotle already noted nearly 2,500 years ago. For this reason, artists – those skilled enhancers of experience – are generally thought to be the expert users of metaphors, poets and writers in particular.

Unfortunately, it is likely this association with the arts that has given metaphors a second-class reputation among many thinkers. Philosophers, for example, have historically considered it an improper use of language. A version of this thought still holds significant clout in many scientific circles: if what we care about is the precise content of a sentence (as we often do in science) then metaphors are only a distraction. Analogously, if what we care about is determining how nutritious a meal is, its presentation on the plate should make no difference to this judgment – it might even bias us.

By the second half of the 20th century, some academics (especially those of a psychological disposition) began turning this thought upside down: metaphors slowly went from being seen as improper-but-inevitable tools of language to essential infrastructure of our conceptual system.

Leading the way were the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson. In their influential book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), they assert that 'most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature'. What they mean

by this is that our conceptual system is like a pyramid, with the most concrete elements at the base. Some candidates for these foundational concrete (or 'literal') concepts are those of the physical objects we encounter in our every day, like the concepts of rocks and trees. These concrete concepts then ground the metaphorical construction of more abstract concepts further up the pyramid.

Lakoff and Johnson start from the observation that we tend to *talk* of abstract concepts as we do of literal ones. For instance, we tend to speak of ideas – an abstract concept that we cannot directly observe – with the same language that we use when we speak about plants – a literal concept with numerous observable characteristics. We might say of an interesting idea that 'it is fruitful', that someone 'planted the seed' of an idea in our heads, and that a bad idea has 'died on the vine'.

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It is not just that we speak this way: Lakoff and Johnson take us to really *understand* and make inferences about the (abstract) concept of an idea from our more tangible understanding of the (concrete) concept of a plant. They conclude that we have the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE PLANTS in mind. (Following convention, I will capitalise the conceptual metaphor, wherein the abstract concept comes first and is structured by the second.)

Lakoff and Johnson further illustrate this with the following example. In English, the abstract concept of an argument is typically metaphorically structured through the more concrete concept of a war: we say that we 'win' or 'lose' arguments; if we think the other party to be uttering nonsense, we say that their claims are 'indefensible'; and we may perceive 'weak lines' in their argument. These terms come from our understanding of war, a concept we are disconcertingly

familiar with.

The novelty of Lakoff and Johnson's proposal is not in noticing the ubiquity of metaphorical language but in emphasising that metaphors go beyond casual speech: 'many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war.' To see this, they suggest another conceptual metaphor, ARGUMENT IS A DANCE. Dancing is decisively a more cooperative enterprise than war – the goal of an argument under this framing would not be to 'win' it but to produce a pleasing final product or performance that both parties enjoy. The dynamics of how we'd think about an argument under such a framing would be very different. This highlights the role of metaphors in creating reality rather than simply helping to represent it.

Read the rest here.