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It's (Not) Just a Figure of Speech: Rescuing Metaphor

Cover Page Footnote

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Anna O. Soter

"It's as hot as Hades..."

"It's hotter than a kiln..."

"It's so hot, I'm burning up..."

Poets may grind their teeth, chagrin and impatience coursing through their arteries with the above commonplace metaphoric declarations. These declarations pervade what may go down on record as the hottest summer (2012) since weather records have been kept. I won't concern myself with teasing apart various metaphoric cousins (most commonly, simile, metonymy and personification) on the grounds that all language is essentially metaphorical, and equally important. We essentially think in metaphor as Bartel, Lakoff & Johnson, Ricoeur, and others have also argued. "Metaphor" wrote Jose Ortega y Gasset "is probably the most fertile power possessed by man" (cited in Ivie 1). And yet, we may well wonder why metaphor and other kinds of figurative language have caused so much anxiety in schools. Why has metaphor, in particular, created concern for countless nonplussed and hapless students as they hunted for an example in poetry or attempted to explain what such a metaphor "means?"

We encounter metaphorical language daily—language that bears closer scrutiny beyond the typical comprehension-like questions that accompany typical metaphor-focused exercises in literature/language textbooks and classrooms. Consider the following: "Explain the metaphor in lines 5-9 of 'Love Without Love.' How does the image of love expressed in this metaphor compare with some of the images you identified and discussed in the section Connect to your Life on P. 346?"¹

Our daily activities—thinking, acting, teaching, and learning—are, according to Ivie, "supersaturated with metaphor" (1). The unruly classroom depicted in the cartoon that accompanies the opening pages of Ivie's *On the Wings of Metaphor* suggests the classic response of suppressed life to artificial constraint. Centered on a large blackboard is printed the infamous acronym of basic literacy: "ABC." Looming over a classroom in chaos, a teacher brandishes a horse whip. His recalcitrant, vibrant-with-life students are depicted as animals such as bears, tigers, and lions. They are standing on desks, dancing, jumping, and shouting. One exception: a quiet creature that appears to be a shy, befuddled groundhog wearing a dunce cap, sitting behind a desk in a corner of the room (x). The scene is both hilarious and sobering, representing what many of us in education know to be a clichéd but traditional illusion: teachers have to constantly constrain the life in their students in case it erupts and bursts forth against the minimalistic view of learning that public education has, unfortunately, long been prey to.

I am puzzled that in the P-12 educational setting, metaphor remains almost exclusively secluded in the literature classroom, specifically appearing during the poetry unit. All of us use metaphor, whether clichéd or newly invented, without realizing we're using it. More recent texts for language arts, primarily intended for pre-service language

¹ This typical example exercise is drawn from McDougall Little's *The Language of Literature*, an integrated literature/reading/writing/grammar text for 10th graders, 2000, 349.

arts teacher education (e.g., Harmon and Wilson's *Beyond Grammar: Language, Power, and the Classroom*) give a nod to metaphor beyond its traditional role in poetry. But the figure itself does not rate an extended discussion, nor does it serve as the core concept for exploring how we use language and how others use language to influence us. Harmon and Wilson note that "meaning is multiple and metaphoric, and thus, ambiguous" and that words are "polysemous," their meanings "multiple and varied" (42). An explicit discussion of metaphor expands on this description (42-44), but neither the term nor the concept is referred to explicitly. Extensive and thoughtful discussions occur in successive chapters about uses and abuses of language in advertising and politics: doublespeak, euphemism, jargon and slang—uses of language that abound with metaphorical expressions. Consider the authors' example of "cleansing" as a metaphor for the clearing of an area of Iraqi troops (49). What should our students make of such a sanitary, domestic term for such a bloody act? Shouldn't we ask them?

Texts intended for use by pre-service and professional teachers tend to be constrained, not only by editors of major publishing houses as well as their marketing divisions, but also by reviewers of proposals who are typically familiar with standard curricula. What is considered to be appropriate in language-focused texts, or rather, what will *sell* these texts typically excludes the more extended, radical discussions about metaphor that Lakoff, Johnson and others have provided. Why? Such texts are geared for use in the P-12 educational setting. Another issue with respect to wider applications of metaphor in current Language Arts curricula is that many teachers have not conceived of metaphor as a common phenomenon in daily language use. Yet it pervades many fields including advertising, politics, business, mass communication, even in health and wellness. Teachers' own education in metaphor has typically been restricted to its role in poetry as one of the "figures of speech." Unless they have read widely about other ways of considering metaphor, I've found that it takes extensive professional development for teachers to reformulate instructional materials that present metaphor in relation to language and thought.

Scholars such as Lakoff and Johnson, Bartel, Postman, Ivie, and Botha continue to argue that metaphor is a critical missing phenomenon in educational settings. The most prevalent reasons as to why metaphor matters are that:

- metaphor is the conduit through which we conceive experience of the world around and beyond us and our relationship to that world and each other (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 200)
- metaphor constrains as well as creates (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 10, 152)
- metaphor underscores the ultimate unity of all existence and we express this concept of life through metaphorical means (i.e. primarily through comparison and analogy—conveying the interconnectedness of all things) (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 22-23)
- metaphoric uses of language enable us to "express this interconnectedness, to express the abstract in the concrete, the macrocosm in the microcosm, the essence of many thoughts and feelings in the single metaphor or symbol" (Bartel 82)

Metaphor is also dangerous if unexamined in that metaphors become conceptually and

linguistically constrained as containers. Because of their figurative nature, metaphors slip under the wire of thought unobserved unless we pay attention to the implications inherent in the comparisons (Lakoff and Johnson 236). Consider again the metaphor “cleansing” that euphemizes wartime murder.

Another, more mundane example of how metaphor is potentially dangerous if unexamined is the vehicle-length Nationwide Insurance caption, *Life Comes At You!* that was posted on buses in my city until recently. The caption implies that we are outside of life, that life is a separate, agentive force that behaves always as a threat—like an out-of-control bus. How much life insurance was sold as a result of that caption worming its way into the consciousness of those who happened to see it? We can only speculate. I suspect that market research by Nationwide must have found it effective enough to have been worth the cost of retaining it for several months.

Bartel writes of our “addiction to comparison,” and his teaching suggestions certainly reveal how pervasive that addiction is, given the wide-ranging domains of language available for close metaphorical analysis, e.g., sports, politics, common proverbs, popular music, business, relationships with humans or animals, human events, medical practice, science, education, and human development (48). Conceptual metaphor systems as identified by Tim Rohrer on his “Center for Cognitive Science of Metaphor Online” encompass a range of metaphors, such as: biology metaphors (e.g., “biosystems are text”), business metaphors (e.g., “unemployment is a foe”), computing metaphors (e.g., “the Internet is an information highway”), education metaphors (e.g., “learning is growth,” “students are plants”), metaphors of mind (e.g., “the mind is a databank”); legal metaphors (e.g., “the law is equal protection for all”); military metaphors (e.g., “lives lost are collateral damage”), medical metaphors (e.g., “the body is a machine”), and so on.² A study of each and any of these fields will likely yield rich data sources for a study of how human beings and their lives are constrained or contained by the metaphors that dominate them.

Given what we know about metaphor’s conceptual power, how do currently available teaching materials actually represent it? An overview is revealing.

Metaphor in Traditional and Current Pedagogy

In P-12 education, the Common Core Standards (CCSS) sought to revamp Language Arts in the post-No Child Left Behind era. Most states have adopted the standards, offering us an opportunity to reconsider how we view language instruction. But instead, every document and every discussion that can be cited indicate that the system has cemented the teaching of figurative language in general, and metaphor in particular, to its traditional oversimplification. To be fair, policy-makers are not typically educators, but they are informed by our community, many of whom serve on advisory boards to government agencies.

The following is what the CCSS have to say about language, limiting it to terms of “conventions, effective use, and vocabulary”:

The Language standards include the essential “rules” of standard written and spoken

² Editors’ note: Rohrer’s website is a very early example of his scholarly work. Links may be unreliable or risky.

English, but they also approach language as a matter of craft and informed choice among alternatives. The vocabulary standards focus on understanding words and phrases, their relationships, and their nuances and on acquiring new vocabulary, particularly general academic and domain specific words and phrases.

In other words, the CCSS begin with a reductive vision of language. They go on to emphasize, among other things, that students should experience complex texts. However, they focus primarily on reading informational texts and exposition to fulfill that goal. Metaphor remains a fringe element, relegated to the poetry section of the English Language Arts Curriculum. Granted the CCSS asserts, in reading poetry, that students need to recognize the many layers of meaning that entail metaphoric language, its elusiveness, its semantic and cognitive complexity, its embodiment of abstract concepts in concrete form, and its relationship to symbolic representation.

Individual states' consequent CCSS documents generally give the impression that they had flexibility in implementing the standards. But I've found that states closely approximated the original CCSS document, notwithstanding. For example, an alignment document of English Language Arts produced by *Learn North Carolina*, a North Carolina University College of Education program similarly limits the study of metaphor to literature—poetry specifically. The document preserves the typically reductive way that such study has been conducted: recognition and identification of metaphors in poetry; metaphor as a literary term; the study of metaphor in an exemplar poem; some analysis and interpretation of metaphor. Then the document recommends that students create “an original extended metaphor poem,” requiring them to make the conceptual leap from metaphor to allegory.

In my informal analysis of several English Language Arts textbooks, I also found that metaphor is discussed as a simple “figure of speech” situated in the context of poetry. Metaphor is not addressed in any systematic way in any other subject across the P-12 curriculum. Contrary to Lakoff and Johnson's urging that we consider metaphor as central to all language, English mother-tongue language pedagogy continues to relegate metaphor to the poetry course or poetry segment of literature units only in relation to its defined function as a “figure of speech,” that is, in terms of its function in poetry. The metaphoric nature of similes is often not made clear. Personification, in function a metaphoric figure, is dismissed relatively quickly. Metonymy is usually omitted.

To cite one of the better examples first, I turn to a recently published and otherwise informative text, *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standard*, where authors Beach, Thein and Webb list metaphor in only three locations. They have this to say under the category of metaphorical “framing”:

Beliefs about an event shape people's actions. Based on the success of your negotiations, both you and your buyer (imagine you are selling your car to a friend), may frame your negotiation as a ‘fair deal.’ As our simplistic example illustrates, beliefs are constituted in language: a ‘fair deal.’ Students could reflect on how use of language or metaphors in framing events reflects certain beliefs (Goffman, 1986). Metaphors reflect underlying cultural models shaping the meaning of actions (Lakoff, 2002). People may use metaphors of madness to describe a love relationship (being ‘crazy’ or ‘out of my mind’ about someone) or metaphors of war to describe sport (being in a ‘battle,’ ‘throwing bombs’ or ‘launching a counteroffensive’). (47)

The second reference to metaphor in Beach, et al. is less illuminating: a teacher (one of the authors of the text) has students “intervene in literary texts” as a way of encouraging “powerful and creative ways to engage in close reading”: “One student worked with a collection of Garcia Lorca poems, hyperlinking them to each other around key images and metaphors and adding images that the poems referred to...” (110). Frequently claimed as a goal in this text is the development of students’ thinking through critical inquiry which in turn is intended to “lead to an empowered sense of citizenship” (111). However, having students engage in unpacking the pervasively metaphorical landscape in which our thinking is grounded and, in many ways, held captive, does not appear to present an equally challenging approach to the development of critical-thinking. In fairness to the authors, particularly to Beach who has had a long and highly respected reputation as a significant scholar in the field of literature instruction, the limited focus on metaphor in this text reflects the general state of mind about metaphor. Metaphor is an object primarily related to literature, and in particular, the study of poetry—it reflects where we are in the field.

The reductive study of metaphor in the context of poetry, despite some reference to the common occurrence of metaphor in everyday use, is similarly apparent in common high school literature texts such as Arp & Johnson’s *Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. Metaphor appears in one of two chapters that deal with “figurative language.” In their introduction to this chapter, the authors comment that “Many people may be surprised to learn that they have been speaking a kind of sub-poetry all their lives. The difference between their figures of speech and the poet’s is that theirs are probably worn and trite, the poet’s fresh and original” (785).

The authors then elaborate on the value of figurative language:

It may seem absurd to say one thing and mean another. But we all do it—and with good reason. We do it because we can say what we want to say more vividly and forcefully by figures of speech than we can by saying it directly. And we can say more by figurative statements than we can by literal statement. Figures of speech offer another way of adding extra dimensions to language. (786)

The authors do not make explicit what these “extra dimensions” are. But the notion of “saying more” with figurative language and the rhetorical force achieved through using metaphor (our language becomes more “vivid” and “forceful”) suggest that our students could benefit from a study of how these attributes can be explored in their own “sub-poetry,” spoken all their lives—even if their metaphors are probably “worn and trite” rather than “fresh and original.” A systematic study of students’ own use of metaphor in their daily speech is, however, not the focus of literature instruction. In terms of its study in poetry, metaphor and its relative, simile, fares little better.

Simile and Metaphor are both used as a means of comparing things that are essentially unlike. The only distinction between them is that in simile the comparison is expressed by the use of some word or phrase (e.g., like, as similar to, than, resembles, or seems); in metaphor, the comparison is not expressed but created when a figurative term is substituted for or identified with the literal term. (786)

Having been provided with the definition of the term “metaphor” (and its cousin,

simile), the text asks students to identify one or more metaphors in a poem. Having identified the metaphor(s), they are then asked to identify two or more metaphors in a poem and explain what these mean. As a follow-up to this identification process, the student may be asked to “create” one or two metaphors themselves. Interestingly, in this inauthentic, artificial context, my own students have often found it difficult to “invent” a metaphor, forgetting those that naturally pour forth in their own informal conversations. In the process of generating metaphor, students are also warned to avoid the “mixed metaphor” problem. This text series, as others, omits examples which have students identify extended metaphors and allegory—a problem since, in naturally occurring literary texts and in many poems, metaphor often builds upon itself systematically as well as artfully.

Questions focusing on the use of metaphor in the Perrine text are typical of what we’ve experienced as both students and educators:

- Explore the comparisons in the following poem [Frances Darwin Cornford’s “The Guitarist Tunes Up”]. Do they principally illuminate the guitarist, the conquering lord, or the lovers? What one word brings the literal and figurative together?
- Work through the metaphor in this poem [Robert Frost’s “Bereft”]. . . . To what is the wind compared in Line 3? Why is the door ‘restive’ (4), and what does this do (figuratively) to the door? (789).

These are not questions that emphasize the freshness and vividness of image that metaphors are purported to produce. Nor are they questions that encourage students to see metaphor as having intrinsic merit because of its semantic and rhetorical value in producing thought that is *more vivid and forceful*, or given “extra dimension” than if it were literally expressed. As to the value of metaphor, Arp and Johnson suggest that metaphor like any other use of “figurative language”:

- affords imaginative pleasure (794);
- provides a way of bringing additional imagery into verse, making the abstract concrete, making poetry more sensuous (794);
- provides a way of adding emotional intensity to otherwise merely informative statements and conveying attitudes along with information (so and so is a ‘rat’) (794-5);
- is an effective means of concentration, a way of saying much in a brief compass; and is multi-dimensional (795).

The impact of these qualities of metaphor in daily life remain unexplored although a study of any of these properties in, for example, the ways metaphor is used by large corporations would have significant relevance to the lives of students as consumers of products produced by such corporations.

An analysis of grades 9 and 10 McDougall-Little *Language in Literature* textbooks—also in widespread use—reveals very similar patterns of how metaphor is treated in current ELA classrooms. Not much has changed.

Examining Metaphors in Daily Life

In the course of any regular conversation among two or more participants, or indeed with oneself, metaphors clichéd or not, abound. While studies such as that by Gibbs and Nascimento have examined the level of congruence among participants in terms of how they recognize metaphors, my research indicates that a Language Arts classroom focus on how metaphor actually functions in the speech and in the lives of ordinary people has been largely left untouched. If metaphor is indeed the conceptual fabric of our thinking, why is it not of interest to teach what kinds of metaphors pervade the thinking of a society, or groups within a society?

Other than literary analysis of metaphor by literary theorists, analysis of metaphor in linguistic systems has remained the dominant focus of research to date, most notably the work of Lakoff and Johnson. Others, such as Auburn and Grady and Kovecses have utilized metaphor in their research on growth, learning, and identity. Indeed, scholars such as Feldman claim that the human brain is wired to think in metaphor—and hence, we use metaphor to express that thinking. Yet the English Language Arts community does not seem interested in the ongoing study of metaphors generated by ordinary people, let alone student-generated metaphoric language. If metaphors are conceptual indicators that enable us to discover underlying beliefs, then analysis of metaphor as some isolated stylistic phenomenon provides only a very superficial understanding of their power.

Classroom practice could examine metaphor as a way of perceiving and understanding experience. For illustrative purposes, I have unpacked several common metaphors and suggest insights they provide into the core beliefs of individuals who utter them (Table 1). This is purely a representative sample but I invite readers to begin to keep records of the metaphors they hear and generate in daily life, to attempt a similar analysis. Even more important, if students examined what they may unconsciously have accepted as ‘truth’ in uttering such metaphors, they may discover how much of their lives remain unexamined, and how many assumptions they carry unquestioningly. I am not suggesting that all of these concepts and experiences students (or we) hold as hard truths are necessarily “bad,” or that they have negative consequences in and of themselves. However, through unpacking such metaphors, we discover which of these are of use (or not) to us in the present, which of these enable us to live present, fulfilling lives, or conversely, which ones hinder us from doing so.

Table 1: Metaphors, Situations, and Interpretations of
Underlying Assumptions about Reality

Sample metaphors	Situations that May Generate Such Metaphors	Underlying Assumptions/ Beliefs
It never rains but it pours.	When events happen in unbroken sequence	We have little, if any, control over events.
Life comes at you.	When an unplanned event happens	We're at the mercy of life, or somehow outside of life.

Sample metaphors	Situations that May Generate Such Metaphors	Underlying Assumptions/ Beliefs
Marriage is a trip.	When marriage seems unpredictable and surprising—or, ironically—the opposite	We have to accept whatever happens in a marriage; marriage has a destination beyond our expectations
It's a noose around my neck.	When feeling threatened	We have an obligation that's not of our own choosing.
It's my bread and butter.	When identifying a main means of support	We could not survive without this source of income.
Fly off the handle	When feeling very angry	We have lost the ability to direct or control our emotions.
Lick something into shape	When presented with a challenge or task.	We can meet a challenge or complete a task to our satisfaction.

As Bartel notes, the clichés we utter seldom “forget their metaphorical origins” (9). How conscious are we of these utterances as having the possibility of being replaced with others? How conscious are we that they may embody deeply buried beliefs about potential, possibility, punishment, and so forth? While such phrases can indicate that our thinking in everyday life remains relatively unexamined, more significant are what I term ‘systems’ and “field-based metaphors,” whereby we remain trapped in thinking that has gained the status of reality. Bartel suggests that teachers could do well to have students study such common examples of these, and in analysis, uncover the assumptions that reflect beliefs and seem fixed, despite how readily we may approach new fashions, technologies, or circumstances.

The above table also shows how metaphor “physicalizes” language through its appeal to the senses, and through those senses enables us to imagine the tangible experience that the metaphor represents. That is, by activating the imagination, metaphor acts as a projection of an experience so that it becomes not only cognitively registered but also “felt.” In this way, metaphor also taps into language as a “field of energy.”³ By this phrase, I mean that language is not simply inert, a representation of things, phenomena and experiences, but it acts upon us. Thus, even if we continue to generate metaphors that have become so worn that they no longer surprise us, no longer alert us to a subliminal semantic field, we are still receptive to the word as more than just a word.

³ In a short paper for the general reader (*Intentions, and Old and New Language and Thought Habits* to appear in *Self Growth Wisdom*, Winter, 2013, I propose that we consider language as a “field of energy.” The concept is more extensively discussed in a conceptual paper, currently in review: “A Proposition: Language as a Field of Energy: Quantum Metaphysics Meets Language Education” (Soter, A. & Connors, S. Unpublished manuscript. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University).

Perspectives of Language as a Field of Energy

In Goethe's *Faust*, we are introduced to Faust as he struggles with the meaning of the word, "logos," literally meaning "word" as it is used in the Gospel of St. John. Resulting from his musings, Faust concludes "Im anfang war die Tat" (x). At the literal level, the German word "Tat" means "deed" or "act." However, in the poetic drama, the metaphoric intent of "act" is "word": "In the beginning was the word." Goethe drew on the dual biblical meaning of "word" as the equivalent of "act," conflating the two words so that "act" and "word" were synonymous. Discourse analyst, Neil Mercer provides a variety of other, less literary examples—including marriage vows—to demonstrate that "saying something amounts to performing it" (11). The Russian cognitive psychologist, Lev Vygotsky asserts that a "word is a microcosm of human consciousness," and he believed that words "give humans the power to regulate and change natural forms of behavior and cognition" (153). Many of us, in our personal lives, have asked others to not utter words that we fear to hear, thinking that to do so would bring them to actualization. Philosophers, playwrights, poets, and theorists across diverse fields appear to agree that the relationship between language and what happens (i.e., becomes actualized) is integrally related.

In articulating language as a "field of energy," we can embrace a close relationship between language and action—a quality that has always been intuitively known to anyone who has used language to bring about some "act" (e.g., clergy who declare couples married; judges who determine if a party is guilty or innocent; shamans who chant healing mantras, and so forth).

Even pedagogy in the P-12 context has *implicitly* recognized the metaphoric power of language in promoting non-sexist language in the past decade. More recently, various agencies involved in social development have been engaged in promoting non-violent language. Likewise, we have discovered that our habitual thoughts and the language used to express those thoughts are intricately linked to our physiology. In essence, researchers have long maintained and are now providing scientific evidence that an etiological relationship may exist between thought, language, and the conditions of our lives. According to Lakoff and Johnson,

Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (*Metaphors* 156)

What are the implications of this way of thinking about the role of metaphor (a linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon) in our lives and our students' lives? Bridging the thinking of social constructivism and the world of metaphysics, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors, in addition to encoding beliefs that already exist, create realities for us by shaping our thinking in particular ways, which in turn shapes the lives we live (*Philosophy* 68).

Through metaphor, we highlight and hide thought, orient ourselves and others, create a cohesive society, provide a mechanism for "the coherent structure of experience," cement current meaning, and create new meaning (*Metaphors* 77). In his delineation of the significance of metaphor, symbol and language in our lives, Bartel argues that it lies in

the power of metaphor *to call into being* what we imagine; that language is not some inert object, but a “dynamic force” and that there is a “reciprocal relationship between language and life” (my emphasis 75). Similarly, in her thirty years as a Medical Intuitive, Myss’s case studies suggest a strong link between the way people define themselves and their chronic physical conditions; their illnesses develop metaphoric power in the course of naming themselves *as* their illness. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors function as elements of identity (*Philosophy* 193). Their example of the “war metaphor” utilized under former President Carter’s term of office when faced with an energy crisis has become a pervasive metaphor in the post-9/11 *fight with terror*, as well as many other aspects of life—we *fight* poverty, AIDS, environmental pollution, and ignorance. If we agree with Lakoff and Johnson’s argument that “no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (*Metaphors* 19), then it is time to take the study of metaphor out of the poetry lesson where it has exclusively resided in schools and bring it into the language-as-energy-focused classroom, where we can peel back the layers of meanings and intentions entailed in the metaphors we use in our daily lives, to at least be aware of to what extent the metaphors we use so unconsciously have become the “metaphors we live by.”⁴

Concluding Thoughts

How can we invite students in our classrooms to become aware of these powers inherent in the metaphorically rich language they and others use, and, in becoming aware of such power, to engage in it as Mike Rose asks, “in some fuller way” (163)? A pedagogy that embraces the common notion in most if not all other fields of human inquiry and endeavor—the notion that language and thought are primarily grounded in metaphor—would result in a radical shift from the primary traditional focus on form and structure in the study of language in educational settings to a focus on the *creative power of language which is manifested in its bringing into being that which is conceptualized and uttered*. Such a view of language would entail a focus on its metaphoric qualities, but not in the restricted, limited way in which metaphor has been dealt with in the context of teaching poetry, namely, the labeling of metaphor as a figure of speech, and asking students to “find” metaphors in selected poems. Through its layering nature, through making the abstract concrete, a metaphor-based pedagogy connects language to life and the lives we live. In embracing a pedagogy of the metaphoric potential of language, we instantiate language as “a field of energy.”

The study of commonly used metaphors both in daily speech and in any institutional setting would provide abundant evidence of the ways in which we conceptualize life, our relationships with each other, our relationships with the society in which we live, our relationship with the planet, money, employment, roles, justice, or opportunity—indeed our relationship to all aspects of the lives we live. Those same clichéd metaphors so common in daily speech (and I would argue, thought), seem not only worthy of probing, but a vital source of information about the individuals who utter them, as well as about the social and cultural settings in which those individuals are located. If metaphors indeed

⁴ Reference to the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s classic text: *Metaphors We Live By*.

reveal our fundamental conceptions of life and our expectations, then studies of metaphor as they are ingrained in the speech of ordinary people should offer us a significant window into our understanding of why beliefs embodied in the metaphors we use are so deeply ingrained. Researching and exploring metaphor from this perspective should reveal the prevailing consciousness within groups and communities, enabling us—and our students—to understand how to interact and even live with them.

A pedagogy that centers on metaphor acknowledges that to name a thing by another name is to perceive it differently, to allow space for multiple perspectives, and as Geary describes it, to unleash the synesthetic power of language to help students grasp “stimulus in one sense organ through a different sensory system” (76). A pedagogy that centers on metaphor introduces students to the means by which we create as well as destroy, discover the interrelatedness of language and experience, challenge collective uses of language (e.g., through media, institutions, and organizations), reinforce beliefs and values, make choices in our interpersonal relationships, and so on. A pedagogy that centers on metaphor attunes students not only to language as a field of energy, but also to language as “fields of play”—as Richardson puts it—providing students with personal goals to study language. Instead of the groans that often greet middle and high school teachers when the grammar/vocabulary sections of a language arts textbook are opened, we can, through such a pedagogy, provide them with a sound rationale for the study of language that truly offers them something of the same profound discovery that Helen Keller made when she discovered language:

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought: and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me—I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! (211)

I applaud the emergence of P-12 language texts such as Noden’s *Image Grammar* and Weaver’s *Grammar to Enhance and Enrich Writing*, which both focus on the relationship between language and contexts of use. The propositions about how we make meaning through written language as expressed in these books are sound and well-grounded in theory and research. Harmon and Wilson articulate in their introductory chapter the now widely accepted argument in scholarship of critical literacy that:

It is a commonplace to discuss the obvious influences of thought and culture on language—how what we say and how we say it are largely a result of our cultural influences and experiences—but it is equally important to consider the reciprocity involved in language and culture—how language influences thought, reinforces it, and shapes it . . . linguistic patterns (according to linguists) have the potential to constrain one’s thinking and shape it in culturally significant ways. (27-28)

If we accept the notion that language can, in these ways, profoundly influence our *actions* as well as our thinking, we will question yet again, why the most recent major overhaul of Language Arts curricula at a mandated national level continues to ignore the social and political significance that any serious study of metaphor would yield. Metaphor has remained, at this significant level, firmly chained to its traditionally prescribed role as

a figure of speech in isolated poems. Metaphor remains as yet, the Rapunzel of language, understood to be a “precious object” but potentially dangerous if freed from its long-standing constraints. We and our students court metaphor only through ineffective gestures, and more often than not retreat, frustrated with the little that we have gained from the encounter.



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