Metaphorical mediation of organisational change across space and time

Stream: space and time in organisations

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Abstract

This study shows how metaphors mediate organisational change across space and time. There is a review of the management literature on space and time and a philosophical framework developed from the literature on postmodernism, hermeneutics and metaphor. The data consists of 113 speeches by Vice Chancellors of a distance learning University, recorded in texts. Texts are apposite for this research as they transmit meaning across time and space. Hermeneutics is an appropriate methodology because it enables interpretation across temporal and spatial distance. This research shows that textual metaphors mediate change across space and time in five ways: transferring from familiarity to strangeness, providing coherence across space and time, decontextualisation and recontextualisation, ‘breaking distance’, and changing reality through changing language. The practical implications are that metaphors enable managers to communicate change across time and space, and help staff accept it by simultaneously mediating continuity and change. Textual metaphors are continuously available and interactive, enabling dialogue between managers and staff across time and space. The research limitations are the focus on formal organisational texts and exclusion of informal texts and conversation. Furthermore, the focus on textual metaphors means that change outcomes are not studied; there should be further research on how metaphors affect change over time and space. This paper is original in showing how metaphors mediate change across both space and time. Metaphors translate the organisation across distance, fusing spatial and temporal horizons, effecting organisational change by changing language. The organisation becomes a metaphor of itself, recontextualising across time and space.
Introduction

The purpose of this article is to show how metaphors mediate organisational change across time and space. The paper argues that metaphors provide practical tools for managers to communicate change across these dimensions. Change participants can more readily accept change communicated through metaphor, as it simultaneously mediates continuity and change. Furthermore, textual metaphors are continuously available in the organisation and their interactive nature allows a constant dialogue between managers, as authors of organisational texts, and their staff, who read them in different times and spaces.

The paper introduces the key themes by reviewing the management literature on time and space and discussing the role of language in managing change across these dimensions. There is an outline of the philosophy of language adopted in this research, with reference to the literature on postmodernism, hermeneutics and metaphor. The organisation selected for discussion is a university that is introducing distance learning and the data consists of 113 Vice Chancellor speeches, recorded in texts. Texts are apposite for this research as they transmit meaning across time and space. The data is analysed using hermeneutics, which enables interpretation across temporal and spatial distance. Following an explanation of the methodology and analysis of findings, there is a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, and research limitations. The paper concludes with a discussion of the originality and value of the research.

Time, space and change

Time and space are salient to organisational change. Taylor’s (1911) time and motion studies advocated work standardisation, job and pay differentiation, detailed timetables, time clerks, and time allocation for specific tasks and rest periods. He also argued for the division of manufacturing and office work locations, workspace reorganisation and office space compartmentalisation. The management literature is now re-examining the relationship between change, space and time. For example, Walck (1996) uses the metaphor of ‘place’ to imagine how an organisation could radically recreate itself. The special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, on the strategic use of the past and future, identifies how organisations appropriate (Carroll, 2002) and revise the past (Gioia, Corley & Fabbri, 2002) by crafting thoughts (Ooi, 2002). Parker (2002) discusses the symbiotic relationship between nostalgia and novelty, whereby the organisation changes without changing. Remembering the past, interpreting the present and imagining the future all affect organisational change (Ford, 2002).

‘Scientific management’ treats time and space as simple commodities, while recent literature argues that these dimensions are constructed (Hansen, 2004) and complex. For example, staff conceive of the organization as place while top managers theorise it as space (Ford and Harding, 2004). Time is seen as linear, cyclic (Burrell, 1992), dialectical (Cunha, 2004) or divided into
reified clock time and timely kairos time, while space is divided into abstract space and concrete place (Rämö, 2004). Czarniawska (2004) complements the notions of chronological time and centres of calculation with kairotic time and dispersed calculation, proposing the study of action nets and mobile ethnologies.

The socially constructed view of time and space is associated with organisational change. Spacing and timing relate to issues of organising and mediation (Jones et al. 2004). Managers engineer the spacing and timing of activities into a centripetal amalgam (Hoskin, 2004). Innovations are adopted within space and time, which are commodified, stretched and colonised (Clark, 2003).

Language and texts organise time and space. Therefore, we need to identify the prosaic practices that allow organisations to cohere in space and reproduce in time (Thrift, 2004). Inscriptions have a mediative role, creating spacings and timings (Jones et al, 2004). This research builds on these ideas by demonstrating how metaphors mediate change across space and time.

**Language and change**

Communication is important in promoting (Fox and Amichai-Hamburger, 2001), managing (Lewis and Seibold, 1998) and producing organisational change (Ford and Ford, 1995), although the implementation of change is also associated with communication problems (Lewis, 2000). Language has even been seen as the “crucible of change” (Burk, 1995, p.14). A special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ‘Organisational Change as Shifting Conversation’, explores the relationship between language and change. Successful change managers engage in ‘change conversations’ in times of uncertainty (Palmer et al, 2004) and conversion stories are constructed to embrace a post-change organization (Bryant and Cox, 2004). Of particular relevance to this research is Jabri’s (2004) study of the interrelationship between change and texts, where change involves shifting identities, achieved through utterances.

**Philosophy of language**

Academics have largely neglected the role of language in managing change across space and time. This role is now discussed with reference to the literature on postmodernism, hermeneutics and metaphor.

In postmodern language analysis, meaning is foundationless and understanding involves inscribing organisation (Cooper, 1989). Language is “ambivalent, evasive, metaphorical and constitutive” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p.151), producing a “crisis of representation” (Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001, p.113). Postmodernism is concerned with a loss of metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) and overarching story line (Giddens, 1990), where we float free among fragments of discourse that swirl through time and space (Bruns, 1992). Time is episodic and discontinuous (Bauman, 1994) and language is characterised by fragmented (Thompson, 1992), ‘schizophrenic’ writing...
(Jameson, 1984). This contrasts with the sentence analogue of hermeneutics, where “the single word belongs within the total context of the sentence” (Gadamer, 1975, p.259).

Hermeneutics means “to interpret” (Westwood and Linstead, 2001, p.115). The hermeneutic problem is that authors write texts in one time and place, which readers in another situation may not understand: the solution is to interpret them for a different time and place (Deetz, 1977). Hermeneutics overcomes the distance between readers and texts by incorporating their meaning into present comprehension (Ricoeur, 1974).

Postmodernism locates understanding within a particular time and place (Palmer, 1969). However, truths tied to specific times and places require interpretation across these dimensions (Bauman, 1987). Hermeneutics transforms our world and thinking by translating texts across temporal and spatial boundaries (Palmer, 2001). This role is explained by two key concepts: the ‘hermeneutic circle’ and the ‘fusion of horizons’, which expand understanding beyond time and place (Gadamer, 1975). The hermeneutic circle is where understanding of a whole work requires knowledge of its constituent parts, while full understanding of individual parts presupposes an understanding of the whole (Dilthey, 1976). We understand our position within one moment and place with reference to our wider experience across time and space, and vice versa. Similarly, the ‘fusion of horizons’ involves a fusion of temporal and spatial horizons. Organisational change has been conceptualised as a fusion of different interpretations (Thachankary, 1992).

In hermeneutics, language allows horizons to expand and connects meaning across time (Palmer, 1969), constructing “meaningful totalities out of scattered events” (Ricoeur, 1981, pp.279). It preserves meaning in time and transmits it to future generations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Because it transcends space and time, language bridges different areas of life and integrates them into a meaningful whole (ibid.). It transcends these dimensions by synchronising, sequencing, constructing and communicating meaning (ibid.). Discourse responds to previous utterances, linking the past and the present, while anticipating future responses (Bakhtin, 1981). Texts are retrospective and prospective (Maybin, 2001). They transmit meaning across space and time by escaping the author’s finite horizon and becoming subject to infinite interpretations (Ricoeur, 1971).

Metaphors combine postmodern fragmentation and hermeneutic integration (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), providing organisations with coherence (Marshak, 1996). Postmodernism is characterised by cracks that are mediated by hermeneutics (Palmer, 2001). Metaphors inhabit these cracks, the empty space between literal concepts, acting as transport vehicles that carry our thinking (Chia, 1996). Metaphors play a hermeneutic role, fusing horizons and transferring from familiar to unfamiliar information. Metaphors do not exist except in their interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976) so, when recorded in texts, they effect a transfer from their author’s space and time to that of their readers.
The transfer from one sphere to another is central to the role of metaphor in organisational change. Metaphor shifts paradigms by altering familiar premises through metaphorical allusion to the old, enabling comprehension of new frames of meaning (Giddens, 1976). Literal talk about change sacrifices tradition, while literal talk about tradition blocks change, but metaphor’s inherent ambivalence enables change while preserving tradition, making the strange familiar (Pondy, 1983).

What qualities enable metaphor to mediate change across space and time? Firstly, the trope is a ‘transport vehicle’ (Chia, 1996, derives the term from the Greek word ‘metaphorikos’, meaning transportation), making it particularly well suited for travelling through time and space. Secondly, metaphor is polysemous (having more than one meaning), allowing it to present past literal meaning and new meaning together (Ricoeur, 1973). Ricoeur likens the resultant double interpretation to stereoscopic vision, which is salient to organisational change, as stereo enables the observation of change from one time and place to the next. Monoscopic vision presents a static picture while stereo captures spatio-temporal dynamics.

Metaphor also extends the polysemous nature of words over time (ibid). At first, metaphor introduces novelty to the lexicon but subsequently it fades when a speech community uses it in the same way as literal meaning. Then it dies with the declining tension between literal and metaphorical meaning, at which point the metaphor adds to the previous polysemy of the word. Equally, polysemy is the result of previous metaphor, which constantly produces new meanings that merge into our familiar present world. Ricoeur (1973, p.111) concludes that metaphor shatters and changes our reality by shattering and increasing our language, so that “with metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality.” Thus, metaphor intertwines with change and time.

Methodology

The paper derives from a larger qualitative study of the textual constitution of organisational values, which investigates the use of tropes in the corporate documents of fifty-one organisations. Given the large sample of the research and limited scope of this article, illustrative data are extracted from only one of these organisations. Furthermore, the selected organisation is particularly relevant to the theme of this paper – a University facing the challenge of delivering distance-learning to students across space and time. The data consists of 113 Vice Chancellor speeches to a broad range of internal and external stakeholders of the University. The speeches had been recorded in texts to make them more widely available. They were delivered to international audiences over a period of ten years (with the exception of one that was made much earlier at the University’s inauguration ceremony). Thus, both the speeches and their recording in texts spanned temporal and spatial domains.

Textual analysis is germane for this research. Firstly, the shift from oral culture to texts gives them a key role in transmitting meaning across space and time (Eisenstein, 1979). The consequent interrelationship between texts
is known as intertextuality, a web ensnaring each story’s historicity that links it with other stories (Boje, 2001). Texts produce menus of discursive resources for organisational sensemaking across time (Watson, 1995). They face back to previous utterances and forward to their addressees (Maybin, 2001). Although commonly perceived as isolated and static, they are generative and dynamic, interweaving with other texts (Barthes, 1975). Secondly, text is durable over time, making it available and meaningful to its addressees across time and space. Its career escapes the author’s finite horizon and becomes subject to infinite interpretations by unlimited readerships (Ricoeur, 1971). Thirdly, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author and its understanding is productive: time “is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but it is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted” - time becomes “a positive and productive possibility of understanding” (Gadamer 1975, p.264). The distance in time, the broadening of our time horizon and the benefit of tradition allow meaning to emerge.

Hermeneutics is a particularly suitable method for researching texts across time and space. Text “endures physically and thus can be separated across space and time from its author” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.110), but hermeneutics overcomes the distance between the text and the reader (Ricoeur, 1974). Hermeneutics is central to both the method and the findings of this research: the organisation uses metaphor to interpret change across time and space and the researcher applies hermeneutical method to analyse the texts. This reflects two key dimensions of hermeneutical theory: interpreting a text and understanding what interpretation is (Palmer 1969). Hermeneutics is an exegetical method and the human sciences themselves are hermeneutical:

“(1) inasmuch as their object displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of...text-interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1971, p.529).

The original aim of hermeneutics was to recapture authorial intention through textual analysis. Contemporary hermeneutics expands the scope of the term ‘text’. The development of a comprehensive epistemology and philosophy of interpretation replaces the concern with authorial intention and method (Prasad, 2002). Hermeneutics is now comprehensively applicable, as it “asserts the universal claim that all human understanding is interpretive” (Hoy, 1992, p.111). Therefore researchers can legitimately use hermeneutics not only for interpreting corporate documents, but also for investigating macrolevel organisational phenomena (Prasad 2002), such as organisational change (Thachankary, 1992).

Applying hermeneutical method involved analysing and coding every speech. The aim was to “strive for the greatest degree of familiarity with the data to be interpreted”, by “becoming aware of the greatest variety of them to determine what is representative and seeing through the easy meanings” (Deetz, 1982,
p.144). In line with the objectives of hermeneutic interpretation, the researcher aimed to be comprehensive by taking account of the author’s thought as a whole (Madison, 1988).

The researcher applied the rule of thematic unity (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1987) to discover unity among disparate expressions (Mercier, 1994) until the interpretation provided a cohesive unit (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The interpretation eventually achieved pattern matching – a fit between events, revealing repetition (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1987) – by identifying the core themes of space, time and change. This mutual enrichment of meaning between texts and the overall pattern (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) developed an interpretation that alternated between parts and whole (Thachankary, 1992), and was “formed in the hermeneutic circle” (Deetz, 1982, p.145). As well as identifying core themes, the researcher identified the common role of metaphors in mediating change. The researcher applied the ‘rule of multiple function’ (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1987) both to highlight multiple meanings in the extended metaphors, and to identify how the play of meanings in the trope mediated change in different ways.

Findings

This section analyses a selection of metaphors used in the Vice Chancellors’ speeches. The first example is an extended metaphor of ‘outer space’, which compares the founding of the university to a concurrent space mission. The comparison is emphasised by the coincident timing of the space mission and the university’s inauguration event. The Vice Chancellor quotes Milton’s poetic description of the creation of the planets to mediate the timelessness of the University, while the reference to the space mission locates it within a specific moment in history. The Vice Chancellor compares the University’s mission to the astronauts’ return from their space mission and God’s return after his creation. These metaphors mediate the University’s achievement of its mission to change the face of higher education through distance learning, even though this is only its first day. The space metaphor connotes the organisation’s virtuality while the ceremonious return of the Creator mirrors the inauguration ceremony and all the changes to higher education it heralds. The inauguration is visualised as more than the founding of a university: it brings with it a changed approach to learning, which is ‘infinitely wider’. The salience of the inauguration is supported by the broadening of the metaphor across space and time, which begins with the astronauts’ opening up of the universe, moves to ‘outer space’ and then expands into God’s creation of the universe.

The next extended metaphor disembeds and re-embeds the organisation within space and time. The Vice Chancellor describes the University as having ‘no cloisters’, in contrast to others that are ‘cloistered’ and ‘delimited in stone’. This negative metaphor frees the organisation from temporal and spatial constraints, while other metaphors in the same speech mediate change across space and time. The University is ethereal: ‘hardly having a campus’ and even where it does, that is only ‘where the tip of our toe touches ground’. The organisation is ‘disembodied’ and ‘airborne’, enabling it to ‘flow
all over’ the land. The metaphor ‘making educational bricks without straw’ encapsulates the challenge of introducing distance learning, which is dislocated from space and time.

As a new provider of distance learning, the University has hardly any historical or local identity. Therefore, the metaphor of Christ’s Hospital, a 16th century school, is used to embed it in space and time. The speech contrasts the centuries that Christ’s Hospital has been teaching with the University’s short life. However, comparisons between the institutions – both are leading schools, which met with initial scepticism – overcomes temporal differentiation, providing the University with an ancient narrative. The University tears space from place, emphasising distant and virtual relationships, while also inserting itself back into time and space through an appropriation of another organisation’s history, so that “time and space are recombined” (Giddens, 1990, p.18). Its disembedding mechanisms interact with “reembedded contexts of action”, where metaphors provide “abstract systems as a means of stabilising relations across indefinite spans of time-space” (ibid, p.102).

In another speech, St. Paul’s teaching in the early Christian church is a metaphor for distance learning. It is argued that St. Paul’s teaching letters to the early Christian Churches make him the first large scale user of distance learning in the West. The change to distance learning in the new educational markets of India and China is justified with the speculation that distance learning techniques also go back a long way in these ancient civilisations. The ‘disembedded’ University uses the St. Paul metaphor to embed itself and its methods into these two ancient civilisations.

The next extended metaphor mediates the radical changes that distance learning will bring. It uses the industrial revolution to convey the magnitude of the communications revolution and its impact on higher education. The Vice Chancellor argues that, in the industrial revolution, the great advance was the invention of machines to ‘multiply the potency of muscles’ – whereas, in the communications revolution, the new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of minds. The metaphor of a steam engine conveys the power of the computer and its capacity to accelerate distance learning. Repeated comparisons between the two revolutions highlight the radical nature of the communications age, while references to the gap of time between them emphasise the innovative nature of distance learning.

The revolution metaphor takes a twist by referring to the first communications revolution and the advent of the printing press. The Vice Chancellor argues that the University embraces change by testing different distance learning technologies. However, its competitors are so resistant to change that they have not even adjusted to the first communications revolution, the printing press (by relying on lectures instead of printed distance learning materials). It is argued that the addiction of the traditional university to the lecture room is a sign of its inability to adjust to the first communications revolution. The ‘revolution’ metaphor is a fitting term to characterise change. It moves across time, from one revolution to another, and across space, from the lecture room
to virtual learning. The metaphor mediates a change from face-to-face learning to education that is freed from time and space.

The next set of metaphors mediate the capacity of the University to change, the constraints on change and the inability of its competitors to change. The Vice Chancellor argues that new methods cannot grow out of old industries. Several metaphors – cars, airlines, telephones, radio, television, computers, software and telecommunications – are used to convey the message that the University’s competitors cannot change. The argument is that, just as these innovations did not come from existing industries, so campus universities cannot change to distance learning: it is a distinctive competence that only new learning providers possess.

The same speech extends one of the above metaphors, so that automobiles are metaphoric for the need to release distance learning institutions from regulatory constraints. The speech explains that people were frightened when cars first appeared, so a law was passed that required a flag to be waved in front of vehicles to warn pedestrians. It is argued that a flag is waved in front of distance learning universities so that they do not frighten the campus universities. The speed of the car is used to indicate the ability of distance learning institutions to change. The Vice Chancellor argues that the person waving the flag in front of these universities should move aside. Just as cars should be allowed to increase their miles per hour, so distance learning institutions should be allowed to speed up change, freed from regulatory constraints.

The final metaphor, a lighthouse, mediates the University’s expanding global market. The Vice Chancellor states that he once used the lighthouse as a metaphor for distance learning: it was to be so accessible that it would ‘suit a lighthouse keeper off the Scottish coast’. He now finds this metaphor limiting and so changes it to an ‘automatic lighthouse’, which mediates both technological development in distance learning and the increasingly autonomous students it serves. The Vice Chancellor argues that, just as lighthouses have become automatic, so students have become autonomous. The word ‘autonomous’ mirrors that of ‘automatic’, emphasising students’ dislocation from place as well as the University’s capacity to meet their needs through virtual learning technologies. While the lighthouse keeper is said to be ‘on the edge of the world’, students are now moving ‘around the world’. Accordingly, the University has to change its ambition from being accessible to a Scottish lighthouse keeper to that of serving an international and mobile student market, by ‘automating’ learning across time and space.

Conclusions

The above metaphors mediate organisational change across space and time in five main ways: transferring from familiarity to strangeness, providing coherence across space and time, decontextualisation from and recontextualisation in space and time, ‘breaking distance’, and changing reality through changing language.
Firstly, metaphors mediate change through transferring from familiar to strange meaning. Hermeneutics involves a play between the text’s strangeness and familiarity (Gadamer, 1975) and metaphors sustain this tension. There is no zero point for understanding, which is always subject to a historical horizon (Risser, 1997). Accordingly, metaphors do not start from a zero point but build from familiar to strange meanings (Gadamer, 1975). They mediate movements through time, building on past experience to create new meanings. For example, the creation of the planets and space exploration are familiar ideas, metaphoric for the University’s accomplished ‘mission’, which is visualised at the very beginning of its life.

Secondly, metaphors provide coherence in the postmodern situation. The University provides distance-learning, fostering virtual relationships and separating space from place (Giddens, 1990). It disembeds itself from space and time to connect the local and global (ibid). To create order and stability it stretches itself across these dimensions by using abstract social systems to span and bind spatial and temporal domains (ibid). Metaphors disembed and re-embed the organisation within these dimensions. For example, the ‘disembodied’ and ‘airborne’ metaphors disconnect the University from space and time, so that it has ‘no cloisters’. Comparison of the University with Christ’s Hospital re-embeds it within a historical and geographical reference point.

The University is dislocated across time and place, such that meaning is partial, context-dependent and momentary. The organisational response is to ‘carry across’ (Chia, 1996) meaning from one time and place to another. Whereas in postmodernism time and space are each disintegrated and dislocated from each other, in hermeneutics they are integrated and connected. Metaphors fuse temporal and spatial horizons by seeing one thing as another. They facilitate organisational change through the movement from one meaning to another and the dynamic tension between literal and figurative meaning. The trope is concerned with ‘being as’, avoiding both the ontological naïveté of assuming that something ‘is’ and the fundamentalist position that something ‘is-not’ (Vedder, 2002). In representing ‘is’ and ‘is-not’ the trope mediates change from one reality to another. Metaphor creates being and in it “we discover being itself in the process of being created. Language that comes into being celebrates the reality that comes into being” so that “in metaphor the dormant potential of beings is awoken” (ibid, p.207). Thus, the organisation is not a fixed entity but constantly becoming, in flux across space and time, continuously transforming its identity (Clegg et al, 2005).

Thirdly, metaphor recontextualises and translates (Sampaio, 1998) the organisation from one space and time to the next. The organisation changes by recontextualising itself: instead of being a literal word locked in a particular time and space, it becomes a metaphor of itself. The organisation is limited by a particular horizon or context, but “our language can attenuate indefinitely its particularity and partiality by submitting itself to an interminable process of fusions of languages” (ibid). The polysemous nature of metaphor means that it is particularly well suited for translating the organisation from one space and
time to another. For example, the metaphor of the lighthouse mediates changes to distance learning that make it more accessible to busy students who live and travel around the world.

Fourthly, metaphor ‘breaks distance’ (Ricoeur, 1973), spatially and temporally. For example, the Vice Chancellor uses metaphor to introduce distance learning to India and China. It is argued that, as with the example of St. Paul in the West, these nations have their own historical antecedents of distance learning. Therefore, it will not be difficult to establish distance learning in these countries, as they have already been accustomed to it. As a provider of distance learning, the University needs to ‘break distance’ (ibid) and uses metaphors that span time and space to achieve this.

Fifthly, metaphor changes the organisation by changing its language (ibid). For example, the comparisons between different kinds of ‘revolution’ transform both the organisation and its vocabulary. Similarly, the ‘car and flag’ metaphor conveys the ability of the organisation to change across space and time. These metaphors introduce new language that mediates change and helps the organisation to comprehend new temporal and spatial horizons.

Finally, the textual recording of these metaphors facilitates change from one time and place to another. Text maintains semantic identity while breaking free from temporal and spatial horizons, providing the organisation with coherence across space and time.

**Practical implications**

A key challenge for managers is how to communicate change so that participants accept it. Managers should reflect on what language they use to communicate change – and consider developing their use of metaphor for this purpose. The trope can help manage change by reassuring staff with references to familiar times and places, while exposing them to new scenarios.

Metaphor is polysemous and its power in changing meaning makes it particularly well-suited for communicating change. Furthermore, the trope’s dialogical nature (being jointly created by author and audience) can develop a conversation between managers and staff about change, making the process more participative. The joint construction of meaning can help participants to engage with change so that they are more likely to understand and accept it. Addressees translate the metaphor with reference to their own historical tradition and are therefore able to determine and limit its translation (Vedder, 2002), so the metaphor takes on meaning within their time and space.

The potential synergy between text and metaphor is salient for change across time and space. Metaphors do not exist except in their interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976), so when their authors record them in texts and readers interpret them, there is a transfer from the writer’s space and time to that of their readers. Text dissociates from the mental intention of the author, displays non-ostensive references and enjoys a universal range of addressees (Ricoeur,
1971). It escapes temporal and spatial horizons and becomes available and meaningful to addressees across time and space. Textual metaphors combine these qualities, offering organisational members an interactive and continuously available source of meaning.

Metaphor and change are interrelated: the trope shatters and changes our reality by shattering and increasing our language. Therefore, managers should consider the costs of not using metaphor. Without it, they and their staff might not be able to visualise change, let alone achieve it. Metaphors mediate change, so attempts to change organisational language should accompany practical change efforts.

Change managers should consider using metaphors that refer to temporality and spatiality. They should herald change by explaining it with metaphors that simultaneously refer to the ‘here and now’ as well as to the future desired state. This will provide participants with a reassuring sense of coherence and continuity across space and time during change programmes. Participants may find it difficult to conceptualise change or appreciate how the organisation could be different in the future. Spatial and temporal metaphors can ‘translate’ change for staff in comprehensible language.

The scope of this paper was limited to one distance learning organisation. However, companies often face the challenge of managing change across temporal and spatial distance and should consider how they could use metaphors to ‘break distance’. For example, the trope could help communicate change within virtual teams and multinational organisations, and introduce change across distance, such as international market expansion.

**Research limitations**

This research is limited to organisational texts and does not include informal texts (such as memos or emails) and conversation. A study of other types of discourse may reveal different findings on the relationship between metaphor (and perhaps other tropes) and space, time and change. However, the advantage of studying formal organisational texts is that they are concerned with change at the organisational level. Furthermore, texts have special qualities compared to speech, enabling them to traverse space and time, making them appropriate for this study.

This research has highlighted the role of metaphors in mediating change, but their strength, polysemy, is their limitation. Metaphors have uncertain meaning, which can lead to unreliable communication and interpretation (Ramsay, 2004). They can result in flights of fancy, relativism and subjectivity (Morgan, 1996). Although metaphors can mediate change, participants may find that their inherent ambivalence prevents the intended change from being communicated clearly enough.

Are the findings generalisable to other organisations? The large data set for this organisation and the broader sample of 51 organisations suggests that metaphor generally has a role in mediating change across space and time.
However, the earlier discussion of the hermeneutic circle (understanding the parts with reference to the whole) suggests the need to review these findings in the light of other organisational contexts not included in this sample. This would not amount to a change of interpretation but a fusion between the horizons of this research and those of future studies.

**Future research**

The management literature is overly concerned with defining and classifying time and space, as if they were static entities. More attention should be given to their dynamic nature and relationship. Change takes place over time and space but all too often this is ignored, or time and space are discussed separately. Time, space and change are so interwoven that attention to their relationship offers a better perspective for understanding and managing change. Furthermore, researchers need to become more skilled in perceiving the role of metaphor in simultaneously changing the organization and its language. This research concentrates on change processes, but there is a need for further research on the extent to which metaphors affect change outcomes. Finally, this research focused on texts: there should be similar research on the role of metaphors in speech.

**Originality**

This paper is original in showing how metaphors mediate organisational change across space and time. The management literature has paid scant attention to the relationship between these dimensions and change. In contrast, this research emphasises change through both space and time, and shows how metaphor mediates that change. Metaphors break spatial and temporal distance by translating the organisation from one time and space to another, fusing spatial and temporal horizons, effecting organisational change by changing the organisation’s language. The organisation becomes a metaphor of itself, recontextualising across time and space.
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