MANAGING METAPHORS:
LANGUAGE AND MEANING IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Most business scholars agree that managerial rhetoric plays an important role in organizational effectiveness. A large body of literature describes the power of metaphors and other figures of speech to influence behaviors, shape attitudes, and create positive or negative images about organizations (e.g., Grant & Oswick, 1996; Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998; Putnam, 2004). Those concepts have practical application for managers. After Ward Churchill, a faculty member at the University of Colorado, compared victims of the September 11, 2001, attack to “little Eichmanns” in an essay posted on the Internet, his comments became so inflammatory that the Governor of Colorado called for a revision of tenure laws in higher education, and University president Elizabeth Hoffman eventually submitted her resignation rather than continuing to serve in an atmosphere of conflict and distrust. In a newspaper interview, Hoffman said, “It seemed to me that, given what's been swirling around the university, I just wanted to take off the table the continuing speculation about my future” (Kane & Hughes, 2005). Obviously, language can move an organization in ways that have serious consequences for leaders.

Although considerable work has addressed the theoretical links between metaphors and organizational communication, no consensus exists about the way metaphors work (Cazal & Inns, 1998). A recent survey proposes a “taxonomy” of uses of metaphor “in the literature of organization analysis” (Inns, 2002, p. 308), and identifies various research positions. One position adopts a representational and positivist stance, which argues that the world exists objectively “out there” and that figurative language is a distraction from literal meaning (e.g., Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982). Other theorists reject the objectivist “mythology” and insist that metaphors constitute a human capability to comprehend experience “like seeing or touching or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 239). We extend the line of research initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and explore in greater depth the notion that metaphorical language is neither objective nor subjective in meaning, but something cognitively and categorically distinct from an artificial division between the “self” and the “world.”

The thesis proposed here is that metaphor, presented as an aesthetic form, results in an active apprehension of knowledge. Such knowledge consists of more than facts and information — it is an affective state which simultaneously invokes cognition and produces a crucial sensory response. Metaphor translates an experienced reality into a perceptible object that has emotive import as well as discursive content, and neither quality is separable from the creative imagination that produced the object. In short, metaphor has meaning that goes beyond, and is not reducible to, either rational discourse or emotive utterance. The metaphorical use of language is essentially poetic in quality and has its roots in the nature of language itself. Metaphor drives creativity, leading to a shared vision of the “way things are.” Properly understood, then, metaphor can be a powerful tool for infusing vision with a particular and unique kind of meaning. It is essentially poetic in nature.

We commence with a survey of the basic literature on metaphor from communication and organizational studies. That literature develops a number of insights which have become useful to organizational analysis. To add to the stream of research, we offer philosophical arguments about the use of poetic language and its relation to ways of knowing the world. We contend that metaphor is more than an embellishment of some discursive concept; metaphor in fact is a means of knowledge that comes into being prior to conceptual exegesis. The importance of that point is that it allows managers to communicate feeling as well as information. In terms of theory, the paper goes beyond current approaches in communication and organization and proposes an alternative mode of analyzing managerial rhetoric. To conclude, we compare the use of metaphor in a poetic context and a managerial one, and discuss the implications of the comparison.
Metaphor and Organizations

Over the past several years, organization scholars have increasingly argued for a recasting of our images of organizations to adhere to a linguistic turn in social sciences or language-based conceptualizations of organizations (Boje, 1995; Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996; Putnam, 1999). This progression toward conceptualization of organization grounded in discourse is consistent with changes occurring in organizations and with the challenges organizational researchers may face in the future (Putnam, 1999). In this section, we provide a brief summary of the literature dealing with the use of metaphor in organizational studies (for a more exhaustive review of metaphor see the work of Putnam et al., 1996, and Putnam, 1999). Next, we examine the basis of these ideas and show how our approach goes beyond previous theoretical speculations on metaphor in organizations and offers a contribution to the analysis of meaning in communication.

In an early contribution to the field, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that the conceptualization of the world is largely dependent upon interlocking systems of metaphors. Metaphorical expression makes up the foundation of our language and provides a fundamental structure for experience (Koch & Deetz, 1981). A metaphor is a way of seeing a thing as if it were something else, thereby providing a cognitive bridge between two dissimilar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Through the use of metaphor, organizational scholars have linked abstract constructs to concrete things (Ortony, 1979), and tied the familiar to the unknown (Hawkes, 1972). The metaphorical form “A is B” represents the perception, conceptualization, and understanding of one object or event in terms of another. Metaphorical expression is made possible and has its power by a non-ostensive but directional reference to the main metaphor (Koch & Deetz, 1981). A common example in the literature for this expression is found in the metaphor “WORK IS A GAME.” The particular experiential aspects of life are highlighted by the more clearly conceptualized and widely shared understanding by the game. Thus, metaphor represents one way of seeing as possible. In the “WORK IS A GAME” metaphor, work comes to be seen as a game, with players, losers, good moves, and strategies (Koch & Deetz, 1981; Putnam et al., 1996).

In organizational studies, metaphors contribute to theory construction, help to structure beliefs and guide behavior in organizations, express abstract ideas, convey vivid images which orient our perceptions and conceptualizations, transfer information, legitimate actions, set goals, and structure coherent systems (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1979; Putnam et al., 1996). Because metaphors are enacted and surface through everyday language use, they can be used as analytic tools to gather data about specific organizations. Data which has been gathered by research include capturing perceptions and reactions to ambiguity with organizational goals (Feldman, 1991); norms, motives, and meaning in studying organizational culture (Pondy, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984); the nature of struggles between competing ideologies (Hirsch & Andrews, 1983; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987), and covert practices that mask power relationships by highlighting certain features while suppressing others (Deetz & Mumby, 1985).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) showed how systems of metaphors develop out of the most clearly delineated and shared life experiences. These include at least spatial orientations, ontological concepts arising in physical experience, and structured activities (eating, moving, seeing). From these experiences arise metaphorical concepts, which fall into three categories: orientational metaphors which appear to organize a whole system of concepts with one another and are typically spatial in nature (e.g., control is up: “I have control over him”); ontological metaphors which allow us to understand experiences through objects and substances and typically quantify, group, and categorize experience to the extent that they appear to us now as straightforward, literal description (e.g., mind is a machine: “We’re turning out new ideas every day”); and structural metaphors which go beyond naming and quantifying concepts—they allow us to build meaning of one concept in terms of another (e.g. understanding is seeing: “I see what you’re saying”). The most basic of these metaphors have become sedimented through habitual use. Lakoff and Johnson
(1999) called them “literal metaphors” to stress the point that while seeming literal; they depend upon a comparison between two different kinds of things. The work of Lakoff and Johnson influenced the work of Morgan, whose research may be considered the theoretical pedigree of the use of metaphor by modern organizational scholars. Morgan (1980) analyzed the ways in which traditional metaphors (e.g., organizations as machines or organisms) determined theoretical discussion of organizations. Morgan's perspective has been useful in conceptualizing paradigms for organizational research by using metaphor as a systematic way of thinking about how we should act in a given situation (1997).

Metaphor from a perspective of communication has aimed at understanding social reality (Cunliffe, 2002; Putnam et al., 1996). Weick (1979) demonstrated the weaknesses of linear models of social reality in organizations which focus solely on either the effects of social structure on interaction in the organization or the manner in which social structure is developed from communication practices. As interpretive research (or sociological hermeneutics), metaphor has been used to show how things mean what they do in the organization and to reveal implications which are overlooked in everyday organizational thought and action (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Most recently, Putnam and her colleagues (1996, 1999; 2004) have demonstrated the use of metaphor in examining the domains and orientations to research in the communication-organization relationship. Taken together, these works speak to a history and predication of scholarship employing an instrumental use of metaphor in organizational studies. For example, instrumental goals and needs include the use of metaphor as an instruments that socialize newcomers (Brown, 1985); legitimize power relationships (Mumby, 1997); enhance identification processes (Kreps, 1989), perform managerial roles (Trujillo, 1985); and act as implicit mechanism of control (Kunda, 1992). Often, an instrumental view of metaphor in the communication-organization relationship includes research on the uses of communication technology in organizations, the functions of communication in conflict management, and the development of bridges and networks focusing not only on the skill or system within the organization, but represents a ontological stance about communication in organizations (Putnam, 1999).

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the use of metaphor in organization studies often focuses on serving an organization’s ends (Putnam, 1999). The point is emphasized in the following generalization from a leading review of the scholarship (Putnam et al., 1996): “Metaphor is probably best understood as a system of beliefs about figure and ground relationships which serve to highlight certain features while suppressing others” (p. 377). From this perspective, metaphor involves “beliefs” which are presented in the separable components of a “figure” and a “ground,” one of which denotes the desired meaning and a secondary element that develops an illuminating context. It follows, then, that metaphor can be deconstructed for purposes of analyzing its constitutive elements and reassembling those elements into theories of organizational behavior, and scholars using the approach have produced original and influential and works (e.g., Mumby, 1997). We suggest that a different philosophical approach also yields insights for communication studies.

The Origins of Metaphor

One of the hallmarks of modern philosophy is its effort to overcome the Cartesian duality between the individual self and the physical world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The asserted disjunction between “objective” and verifiable kinds of knowledge and “subjective” beliefs leads to contested domains where some forms of knowledge are deemed superior or more trustworthy than others. That bifurcation has given rise to preferred methods of conducting social sciences research, particularly the dominance of quantitative and empirical techniques. In an influential work, Bernstein (1976) traced the restructuring of theory in the social sciences, a development which had its intellectual roots in the encroachment of the “positivist temper” in academia in the 1950s and 1960s. As Bernstein summarizes the point (1976): “Basically, the positivist temper recognizes only two models for legitimate knowledge: the empirical or natural sciences, and the formal disciplines such as logic or mathematics” (p. 5).
Consistent with that focus, scholars deployed new methodologies more closely related to the quantitative techniques in the scientific models. The goal of such research was to produce knowledge free from “normative values” and based on systematic, deductive, and “objective” criteria; it tended to discount theorizing based on rhetorical analysis (e.g., Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982). The turn toward empiricism eventually dominated many social science disciplines, such as economics, and generated sharp debates about the positivist claims (e.g., Dugger, 1992). Similar developments occurred in organization studies with the rise of postmodernism.

In response to the main tenets of positivist philosophy, the postmodernists deal with the problem of dualism by repudiating all forms of “foundationalism” based on the scientific method of the physical sciences (Best & Kellner, 1997). Much of the current linguistic organizational analysis derives from “critical” or postmodern theory (e.g., Cunliffe, 2002; Putnam, 1999). That theory also plays a central role in other business disciplines, such as accounting (Tinker, 2002). In the area of management studies, Alvesson and Willmott (1996) articulated one of the basic premises of the “critical” approach in their assertion, “The idea of value-free knowledge is questionable because it deflects attention from how, in practice, what counts as ‘scientific knowledge’ is the product of value judgments (e.g. about ontology and epistemology) that are conditioned by the specific, historical and cultural contexts of their production” (p. 43). For postmodern and critical theorists, the positivist claims about human knowledge remain suspect and subject to attack as social constructions. According to the recent study by Best and Kellner (2001), post-positivist philosophers do not accept the “naïve realism that informs modern science. They regard all perception and knowing as value-laden and socially conditioned, and they seek self-reflexive clarity regarding the origins and structure of scientific knowledge itself” (p. 110).

One of the limitations of the postmodern turn, however, is that it eschews the possibility of any unified conception of meaning in language. A key doctrine of postmodern thought “turns on a rejection of the notion of [linguistic] representation — in fact, a rejection of an empiricist model of representation, in which the representational baby has been slung out with the empiricist bathwater” (Eagleton, 2001, p. 79, emphasis in original). As a result, statements about important social institutions such as the legal system and its ideals of justice are seen simply as “discourses” that promote dominant interests (e.g., Derrida, 1990). Postmodernists surmount the problem of representationalism by contesting empiricist claims about the nature of meaning in language, and postmodern linguistic productions are only a “text” to be interrogated and deconstructed as articulations of power. One of the most skillful examples of the technique in a managerial context is Arrington and Francis’s (1989) dismantling of the well-known article by Jensen (1983) purporting to establish a “positivist” method of organizational behavior through an agency conception of firms. To summarize the point in the words of well-known scholars in the field (Clegg, Hardy, & Nord, 1996): “Postmodernism announced the death of meaning by showing the meaning of ‘non-meaning’ …” (p. 701). The asserted “death of meaning” leads into a particular kind of non-foundational “space” for a totalitarian appreciation of the visible: “With postmodernization, signs signify everywhere. No space remains innocent of meaning, of style, of ambiguity, of irony. In matters of style, appearance and reference are everything. Scratch the surface and one should find nothing deeper” (p. 701). We propose that, to the contrary, metaphor constitutes the birth of meaning, and a unitary world lies beneath its surface.

Writing fifty years before the postmodern vogue, Barfield (1928/1973) proposed remarkable insights about the nature of language, poetry, and cognition. His ideas ran counter to the philosophical trend of linguistic analysis, which marked the early positivist foray into epistemology dominated by philosophers such as A.J. Ayer (1946). Barfield begins with a description of the aesthetic imagination, which induces “a felt change of consciousness” (1928/1973, p.48). The experience entails the immediate and concrete apprehension of an individual’s surroundings and it is felt because it produces a change in sensory activity that is “attended to.” Poetry creates the aesthetic moment by the physical effect of progressing from one plane of consciousness to another. It invokes a movement of feeling across levels of perception and is sparked by a process of integration. In Barfield’s
words, “This ability to recognize significant resemblances and analogies, considered as in action, I shall call knowledge; considered as a state, and apart from the effort by which it is imparted and acquired, I shall call wisdom” (1928/1973, p. 55).

The most fundamental type of recognition of similarities and differences is metaphor, which is the vehicle of meaning in language. By exploring the roots of language, Barfield concluded that metaphor reveals something inherent and “real” about the natural world that unifies perception, emotion, and understanding. In his view, the origins of language reveal the process of cognition itself. Meaning, that is, inheres in objects, which we know by the names we give them. In Barfield’s description, we may suppose that “the earliest words in use were ‘the names of sensible, material objects’ and nothing more — only, in that case, you must suppose the sensible objects’ themselves to have been something more; you must suppose that they were not, as they appear to be at present, isolated, or detached, from thinking and feeling” (1928/1973, p.85). The splitting up of meaning into “objective” and “subjective” involved a process of separating the abstract from the concrete and the referential from the emotive. Metaphorical meaning, the fusion of self and other through language, lies at the core of human experience. According to Barfield (1928/73, p. 86), the “mysterious relations” we have with external objects are in fact created for human apprehension by the action of language, and “These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker. (p. 86)

Deprived of the immediate sensory perception of reality, modern man experiences that reality through metaphorical language. Mythology is the systematic reflection of the earliest apprehensions of the world (Barfield, 1928/1973). Writing at the same time in the mid-1920s, the German philosopher Cassirer (1946, p.33) reached nearly identical conclusions about mythical thinking, which he characterized as a religious experience that occurs when external reality “overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified, and confronts the mind as a god or a daemon.”

Building on those aesthetic insights, Langer (1953) developed an integrated theory of aesthetics and philosophy in her book Feeling and Form. Langer considers many versions of artistic expression, including music, dance, painting and drama. Literature, however, poses special problems because it employs a medium used in non-artistic activities — that is, language. Her solution to the problem of kinds of linguistic meaning is a radical one similar to Barfield’s explanation of metaphorical language. Langer (1953, p. 211) says that poets use words “to create an illusion, a pure appearance, which is a non-discursive symbolic form.” The artistic form is a symbolic presentation of feeling, which is a physiological state rather than an emotional condition. She continues (p. 211), “It may take us some time to perceive it, it but the symbol expresses it at all times, and in this sense the poem ‘exists’ objectively whenever it is presented to us. The artistic use of language, in short, resists decomposition into bits of information, ideology, and manipulation. Neither the writer nor the reader “privileges” the meaning of the artistic creation because the expressive form transcends both. To ask what poetic language is “trying to say” is the wrong question. Rather, we ask: “What has the poet made, and how did he make it?” (p. 211).

Differentiating discursive from poetic meaning involves a theory of cognition as well as a theory of aesthetics. Langer’s (1953) approach begins with the process of feeling. As Langer uses the term, feeling is not a description of emotional states, but of actual physical activities of the body. Sensory apprehensions provide the very foundations of human intellect, as Langer demonstrates in her multi-volume work titled Mind: An Essay in Human Feeling (1982). Artistic creations communicate by setting forth an object which is symbolic of feeling; the object has a rhythm and movement embodied in, and inseparable from, its form. Thus, poetry is always something other than “a factual statement” dressed up in verse.

A poem always creates the symbol of a feeling, not by recalling objects which would elicit the feeling itself, by weaving a pattern of words — words charged with meaning, and colored by literary associations akin to the dynamic pattern of the feeling (the
word feeling here covers more than a state; for feeling is a process, and may have not only successive phases, but several simultaneous developments; it is complex and its articulations are elusive). (Langer, 1953, p. 230)

The philosophical insights developed by Barfield and Langer with respect to language, meaning, cognition, and feeling are supported by recent developments in neuroscience. The split between subject and object which plagued philosophy — and which sustains the postmodern philosophical project — is replicated neurologically by the split between mind and brain. In the latter case, researchers have questioned how the organic activity of neurons can produce intellect. A recent treatment of the issue poses the Cartesian dilemma as follows: because the brain has many different functional regions, “How is it then that the personal consciousness subjectively seems unified from an ‘inside’ personal perspective for each of us when the brain is structurally diversified?” (Feinberg, 2001, p. 107). The answer is that “mind” is an emergent force integrated by the nested hierarchies of the brain and driven by purposeful action. That action creates meaning, which has an ineluctably subjective quality.

Modern neurologists reject the argument that mind is reducible to “brain,” because meaning involves the apprehension of a created reality. As Feinberg (2001) puts it: “The creation of outside objects is the fundamental starting point of all minds and the manner in which meaning is created” (p. 143), and he uses the example of a frog, whose brain translates certain movement into a “bug perceiver.” In other words, our mental equipment works by a hierarchy of physical sensation that builds meaning in such a way that it is inseparable from the perception of an object. Barfield (1923, p. 191), somewhat more elegantly, made the following observation about poetic language: “The poetic conducts an immediate conceptual synthesis of percepts. Brought into contact with these by its partial attachments to some individual human brain and body, it meets — through the senses — the disjecta membra of a real world, and weaves them again into the one real whole.” The “immediate conceptual synthesis of percepts” constitutes literal meaning insofar as language has such capacity.

Dylan Thomas, one of the greatest of twentieth-century poets writing in English, devoted himself to the creation of “literal meaning” as defined above. What Thomas understood by that term was precisely the power of metaphor to create previously unapprehended relationships. In a letter to another poet in 1933, Thomas explained the difference between true and false poetry as a function of metaphor (Fitzgibbon, 1966):

A rhyming dictionary, a little selection of natural objects, and a halfpenny gift for stringing pretty words together, and one can write like [your verse] all day. 'My blood is drawn from the veins of roses is on an altogether different plane; here you have added to the by-now meaningless repetition of association, and have contributed something quite lovely both to yourself and to the rose. (p. 97)

Thomas added a jingle to illustrate his point about artificial metaphorical fusions: “I am one with the steamship & one with the trolley/And one with the airdale & one with the collie” (p. 97). The difference between true and false, Thomas insisted, was the production of poetic meaning. He concluded his artistic credo with a statement concerning the effect of metaphor on the poem’s reader (Fitzgibbon, 1966, p. 97): “By the magic of words and images you must make it clear to him that the relationships are real.” Thomas's insistence that metaphors have a unique and indissoluble import is echoed in a succinct assertion by a well-known linguist: “We must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or a meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning)” (Davidson, 2000, p. 346).

The insights from philosophy, aesthetics, neurology, and poetry establish basic propositions about language, metaphor and meaning. Human mental activity creates the physical world, to the extent that the world has meaning, because we know the world through appearance (Barfield, 1957). The closest we can approach to the “real,” “true,” or “literal” meaning in the world is through the creation of metaphorical relationships, which offer the felt proof of unified reality. Metaphors are powerful, but they are not simply tools to be recruited for manipulation. Indeed, the more effective the metaphor, the less likely it will have an available discursive content. Poetic language generates a complex emotional state
which speaks to the human condition generally, and not specifically to the intentions of the speaker. The next section extends the ideas into a practical demonstration.

Managing Metaphors: Poetry and Rhetoric

Our argument so far suggests that the current focus of organizational studies and metaphor can be expanded by further development of the “aesthetic side of organizational life” (Cunliffe, 2002; Gagliardi, 1996). We have proposed an alternative to the postmodern way of viewing metaphor only as an instrumental and functional rhetorical tool intended to manipulate members of the organization through ideological appeals. The analysis of language can take a critical or postmodern perspective, which may be suitable for deconstructing discursive communication, but it has limitations when managers and leaders successfully incorporate poetic meaning into their rhetoric. In that case, communication exceeds the reach of the postmodern approach and its emphasis on meaning as “up for grabs.” To illustrate the point, we consider two examples, both having to do with loss and grief. The first text is a poem by e.e. cummings, which we contrast in its use of metaphor with former President Ronald Reagan’s speech designed to mobilize Americans following the Challenger’s disastrous flight. The two texts share common themes of grief, heroism, and transcendence. As such, they fall within an American tradition dating from the early nineteenth century (Wills, 1992).

Cummings’ eulogy to a western legend, Buffalo Bill Cody, opens with the following lines:

Buffalo Bill’s
defunct,
who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfivesixpigeonsjustlikethat . . .

The poet’s topic is death, but the poem establishes a narrative movement of action and vitality. The word “defunct” conveys an ironic meaning through the image of an inoperative machine rather than a person, thus signifying only a cessation of motion rather than an extinction of the human body. The “watersmooth-silver stallion” densely compacts several levels of metaphor. The sleekness and sheen of water, the most common of all words, combine with the reflective brilliance of silver, connoting brightness and rarity, and the stallion symbolizes potency, power, and dynamism. Buffalo Bill’s mastery of the animal signifies his enduring stature. By linking together the words of the last phrase, cummings suggests the speed, elegance and effortless grace with which Buffalo Bill performed amazing deeds “justlikethat.”

The concluding five lines of the poem capture Buffalo Bill’s youth, vigor, and transience, while simultaneously denying his mortality:

Jesus,
he was a handsome man,
and what I want to know is
how do you like your blue-eyed boy
Mr. Death

Gesturing toward Christian culture, cummings alludes to the religious promises of immortality. The references to the “handsome man” and the “blue-eyed boy” convey Buffalo Bill’s magnetism, which paradoxically makes him death’s favorite as he was everyone’s favorite in life. The final image of “Mr. Death” gains a metaphorical resonance by personifying a natural force and imbuing death with human qualities of desire and affinity. Altogether, the tribute concisely, effectively, and efficiently informs the reader what is important about the subject’s life. It accomplishes that end by creating an illusory world which encircles us within its boundaries and makes us a part of the poet’s experience.
Managerial rhetoric, of course, is not poetry. It may, however, have poetic qualities. We take as an example Ronald Reagan’s speech on the Challenger tragedy, which is ranked eighth among the top ten political speeches of the last century (University Communications, 1999; see Appendix A). The text of the address consists of six brief paragraphs, which create a “virtual world” of narrative feeling, not unlike a fictive, poetically rendered creation (e.g., Langer, 1953, p. 298-305). Similar to the cummings poem, Reagan’s speech honors the dead, inspires the living, and through the action of metaphor, creates a unifying vision that mobilizes communal sentiment. The power of leadership through rhetoric informs such iconographic events as Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg, where the “principal contrast” is also “between life and death” (Wills, 1992, p. 59), and it results in emotional apprehension (knowledge) and a state of understanding (wisdom).

Using the evocative metaphor of a journey, Reagan begins his speech with a historical situation. He refers first to the death of three astronauts nineteen years earlier in an accident at the Cape Canaveral launch site. He thus grounds the event in the first days of America’s attempts to explore space. But the Challenger tragedy is different, Reagan says, because seven people lost their lives in flight rather than on earth. He lists their names and, in the next paragraph, speaks directly to their families. Grief becomes personalized in the individuals. Reagan then begins to build a national history, turning to the American space program and all of its successes. In the next paragraph, Reagan speaks to the country’s schoolchildren and points to the future of the nation, exemplified by the bravery of the astronauts and their lessons for us: “The future doesn’t belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The Challenger crew was pulling us into the future, and we’ll continue to follow them.”

The two concluding paragraphs rise to the level of poetic diction — the capacity to articulate, rally, and inspire. Reagan captures images of the triumphs of the past and links them with the losses of the present and a transcendent, metaphorical vision of national identity. The historical connection begins with a reference to Sir Francis Drake, who died on the same day as the Challenger disaster 390 years earlier. Reagan makes an explicit connection between past and present: “In his lifetime the great frontiers were the oceans, and a historian later said, ‘He lived by the sea, died on it, and was buried in it.’ Well, today we can say of the Challenger crew: Their dedication was, like Drake’s, complete.” The victims of the Challenger tragedy gain historical consecration similar to the legend of Buffalo Bill.

The conclusion to Reagan’s speech integrates poetic imagery, discursive narration, and concrete language to achieve a powerful statement. In its entirety, the paragraph consists of two sentences:

The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honoured us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved goodbye and ‘slipped the surly bonds of earth’ to ‘touch the face of God.’

The first sentence is an unadorned statement in plain prose. The next sentence, deceptively simple, constructs a virtual history of the event using the detritus of everyday life. The astronauts “prepared for the journey” and “waved goodbye” to the watching nation in the morning of their adventure. Their deaths, like Buffalo Bill’s death, delineate a trajectory of life triumphant. Reagan caps the speech with images drawn from a poem by a wartime pilot (Magee, 1941). The “surly bonds of earth” contain a submerged metaphor of bodily constraint, struggling, and mortality — animate earth refusing to release the flier. The last image, which is the concluding line of Magee’s poem, brings the entire vision to culmination. It has the religious overtones of the Christian tradition captured in the metaphor of “sky” as God’s “face.” At once, Reagan laments the loss of the astronauts and asserts their immortality. The dead, he suggests, endure always. This assertion of life victorious over death completes the narrative arc of the rhetorical moment.

The Challenger speech, of course, cannot be reduced only to its discursive content because its power derives from its form, not from its ideas. Indeed, the ideas are simple, commonplace, and hardly remarkable. The speech is great because it produces a concrete
perception of a grand theme and realizes it as a rhythm of tragedy. “Tragedy dramatizes human life as potentiality and fulfillment” (Langer, 1953, p. 352). The sweep of Regan’s speech is from the vision of exploration as potential to finality as fulfillment. The exploration is fixed in the past, but the lives of schoolchildren look to the future, and the fulfillment is the honor of dying for one’s country (that is, to “touch the face of God”). Thus, the perceptual components of the speech move in a narrative rhythm along a tragic structure. The form of the speech, then, is the only embodiment of its meaning. Even though it looks like a statement of fact about an event, it is saturated with aesthetic materials that both inform us and move us. The aesthetic components of leadership, and the ability of leaders to render the ineffable accessible to us, must count as a useful topic of academic inquiry.

Conclusion

The dominant intellectual paradigms in organization studies consist of the empirical and the critical (Gagliardi, 1996). The first rests on the assumption that meaningful knowledge in social science derives from empirical models, with its elaborate quantitative apparatus and affirmations of objectivity. The critical approach, to the contrary, rejects empiricism as a suspect species of intellectual hegemony. For critical theorists, the foundationalist assumptions of empiricism are unworthy as a path to understanding human behavior. Those contending intellectual constructs both lay claims to a legitimating, but categorically exclusive, epistemology, thereby attempting to carve out exclusive domains for the study of organizations.

Our approach offers an alternative view of metaphor in organizational studies. This view avoids the Cartesian dualism that sustains the competing visions. It relies on the unification of feeling and intellect. Our approach is based on literary dimensions of motivation, action, and communication. Consequently, this paper adds to our understanding of the role of metaphor, myth, and language as it can influence communication and organizational studies. While the approach does not lend itself to testable hypotheses about the way language works, it does emerge from a literary tradition that takes metaphor as a proper subject of study. The argument is that organizational rhetoric can be analyzed in its own terms as an embodiment of unitary experience which stands on its own feet. It is neither persuasive, informative, manipulative, ideological, nor intentional, but more than all of them. While it has an undeniable power, that power resides in a transcendent insight rather than a calculated move toward control.

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