THE PERVERSIVE ROLE OF METAPHORS IN MARKETING SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Marketing scholars must recognize the pervasive metaphorical presence in their field, and use metaphors directly and explicitly in the theory construction process. The benefits can be great, the unknown limitations can be harmful.

INTRODUCTION

We grow up in this culture using metaphors—thinking of one thing in terms of something else: Time is money. He's a pain in the neck. Put a tiger in your tank. Linguists claim that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, although we are not aware of the full extent (Lakof and Johnson 1980). Based on the way we see things and think about them, so we act on them.

In efforts to develop marketing theory, the scientific approach has been intensively applied and other disciplines have been extensively searched. As a result, marketing has come to rely more heavily on metaphors than most social sciences (Zeltman et al. 1982). However, the metaphor as a major building block of marketing science has only recently been addressed explicitly (Arndt 1983, Zikmund 1982).

The more one looks around the marketing literature, the more one finds metaphorical statements. They describe: paradigms (managerial, environmental), theories (wheel of retailing, consumer information processing), and concepts (distribution channel, consumer protection).

The presence of metaphors in marketing raises several fascinating questions: (1) Why is marketing so dependent on the use of metaphors in constructing science? (2) How can marketing scholars use metaphors to develop and communicate better theories? (3) Conceptual systems are largely metaphorical, so the implicit ones, imprison our ability to perceive "reality"—as with such concepts as growth, competition, and satisfaction. (4) If marketing theories are so extensively metaphorical, is marketing essentially a subjective field of study?

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the presence and effects—both positive and negative—of metaphors in our thinking about marketing. After a description of the nature of metaphors in language, their use in the sciences is explored. The functions and types of marketing metaphors are pointed out. A process is presented for using metaphors in theory development.

METAPHOR AS LINGUISTIC DEVICE

Aristotle regarded metaphors as explicit comparisons, based on principles of mere analogy, not objective truth. As ornamental language they were nice, but not really necessary.

After considerable study by several disciplines, metaphors are held to be riddles or mysteries (Ortony 1979). As summed up by Fraser (1979, p. 184): "Metaphors are black holes in the universe of language: we know that they are there; many prominent people have examined them; they have had enormous amounts of energy poured into them; and, sadly, no one yet knows very much about them."

Are Metaphors Necessary?

The sheer quantity of metaphors in language seems to argue for their vital role. Metaphors are a symbolic conception of the world, found in myth and art as well as in language and science (Morgan 1980). Because the "objective world" is not directly accessible to the human mind, it must be constructed from sensory-based knowledge and language (Ortony 1979). Words do not denote things, but only conceptions of things. In the process, "reality" is created (Berger and Luckman 1966).

Metaforas can be seen as a bridge between the known and the unknown (Petrie 1979). They are an important tool for attempting "to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 193). Metaphorical thought may provide insight expressive in no other way (Black 1979).

Metaphors are specifically useful, if not absolutely necessary, when concepts are abstract, new, changing, and/or understandable. In marketing, that may explain their application in such cases as "marketing myopia," "symbiotic marketing," and "strategic window."

How Do Metaphors Work?

The key to understanding metaphor is to see it in terms of the context of the communication act (Black 1979). Going beyond the conventional explanation of metaphor as "comparison," Black (1979) posits the "interaction view." According to him, metaphor has two distinct subjects: the primary (focus) and the secondary (surrounding frame). It works by projecting upon the primary subject a set of associated implications from the secondary subject. They comprise isomorphic networks, mediated through analogy or structural correspondence.

The interaction occurs between the meaning of the sender's metaphor and the perception of the receiver. In the process, features of the primary subject are selected, emphasized, suspended, and organized according to aspects of the secondary subject (Black 1979, p. 29). This approach stresses systems of meaning, not simply the comparison of things or ideas. This can be exemplified by "consumer information processing" as a "computer metaphor."

Do Metaphors Tell the Truth?

Metaphors get their message across even though they are not literally true. In "marketing warfare" it is not expected that Avis will bomb Hertz. A constructive falsehood serves as a means for liberating the imagination (Morgan 1980) or for understanding the imagination (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

At the core of this linguistic deception is the clash of objective and subjective realities. Formal definitions characterize things as a set of inherent properties; they claim to be objective. In contrast, metaphor provide understanding in terms of our subjective experience with other concepts that help delineate the original concept.

What Is the Basis for Metaphor?

Humans tend to conceptualize the nonphysical world in terms of the physical, noting systematic correlates with their experience in both worlds. A metaphor makes sense when it fits our natural experience. This includes two major categories: (1) our bodies and how they function, and (2) interactions with the physical environment and other people.

"Market growth" and "product life cycle" connect with our body-related nature. Most metaphors in marketing can be traced to the physical environment—"durable/undurable goods," "wheel of retailing"—and to the social environment—"consumer sovereignty," "brand loyalty."

Do Metaphors Create Anything?

Black (1979) holds that metaphors are cognitive instruments that create new understandings, based on similarities that previously were not known to exist. As he puts it, "Metaphorical statements can sometimes generate new
knowledge and insight by changing relationships between things designated" (1979, p. 37). They can reveal these connections without making them explicitly, or without the speaker/writer even consciously aware of them.

Metaphors are pragmatic devices in that they facilitate the evolution of language. They allow changes in the perception of problems, assumptions, solutions, threats, opportunities, limitations, and the like. Examples of this process in marketing include "social responsibility," "retail gravitation," and "countersegmentation."

Can One Metaphor Embody the Concept?

Because reality is so complex, a single metaphor at best can only shed light on selected aspects of a phenomenon. Thus, a given metaphor emphasizes some aspects of a concept, deemphasizes others, and hides others.

It takes several metaphors to form a coherent set of explanations to more fully grasp the reality of a phenomenon. The more important the concept to the social system using it, the more metaphors will be created to describe it. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 46-48) detail how for our society "ideas" are metaphorically depicted as food, people, events, products, commodities, resources, money, cutting instruments, fashions, and light sources. In marketing, concepts such as consumers, market, product, pricing, distribution, and sales have each generated a host of metaphors.

METAPHOR IN THE SCIENCES

A debate has characterized scholars concerning whether metaphors are appropriate for scientific discourse (Ortony 1979). One point of view is that the use of metaphors seems too fuzzy, vague, and frilly for scientists, and should remain the rhetoric tools of poets.

Although metaphorical language lacks the precision of scientific language, Boyd (1979) regards it as playing a key ancillary role in scientific theory construction. According to Kuhn (1970), major changes in theories are nearly always derived from shifts in subject matter or conceptual frameworks given metaphorically stated—rather than from new discoveries.

Metaphors may remain under a cloud of suspicion in the sciences, but their abundance and variety attest to their instrumental role. Although lacking linguistic precision, they can serve as "rational strategies for avoiding referential ambiguity" (Boyd 1979, p. 377).

Boyd (1979) states that metaphor is one of many devices for scientists to accommodate language to the world's causal structure. Metaphors provide new terminology and modify existing terminology to describe causes and explanations. Rather than being definitions, metaphors are reference fixing. They can be either constitutive of the theories they express (cognitive psychology's mind as computer), or pedagogical for transmitting theories (physics' atoms as miniature solar systems).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point to classical mathematics as striving to avoid metaphorical usage, as it creates an "objectivist universe" of distinct entities, inherent properties, and fixed relationships. The limited success of mathematical theories in marketing may be related to how vastly subjective our "real world" is. In the end, marketing shares with other sciences Lakoff and Johnson's observation: "The intuitive appeal of a scientific theory has to do with how well its metaphors fit one's experience" (1980, p. 19).

FUNCTIONS OF MARKETING METAPHORS

Understanding Current Marketing Theory

All marketing theories can be evaluated according to the nature of the metaphors involved. The source of the metaphors can be identified (see Figure 1). The choice of metaphors tends to be consistent with the basic values of the culture (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

FIGURE 1. Partial List of Sources of Metaphors

| Agriculture | Construction | Land | Physics |
| Animals | Dance | Love | Psychology |
| Anthropology | Divorce | Machines | Religion |
| Archaeology | Economics | Madness | Sex |
| Art | Family | Marriage | Ships |
| Astronomy | Finance | Mathematics | Sociology |
| Automobiles | Food | Medicine | Space |
| Aviation | Gambling | Mining | Sports |
| Biology | Government | Movies | Theater |
| Botany | History | Music | Trains |
| Chemistry | Hunting | Operations | Warfare |
| Computers | Journeys | Research | Weather |

The structure of the metaphor can be analyzed. Understanding the metaphorical nature of marketing theory can lead to discoveries of additional and deeper insights into the underlying utility of the metaphor. Thus, the metaphor's "hidden" parts can be brought to light. In this way its strengths and weaknesses can be revealed. The coherency of several metaphors that apply to a single concept can be assessed.

Metaphorical candidates in marketing for this type of analysis might be the "price/quality relationship," "short-term and long-term memory," "marketing information systems," and "consumer-goods classification."

Analyze Conflicts between Metaphors

Much of the controversy in marketing—between scholars and practitioners, critics and defenders, line and staff, manufacturers and distributors, among others—can be studied in terms of conflicts between their metaphors. First, the choice of metaphors reveals much about the values, methods, and style of each party. Second, the meaning given to the same metaphor can differ markedly or subtly between rival parties.

Consumerism can be viewed as an "attack" metaphor by some marketers, while it is seen as a "justice" metaphor by consumer advocates. The distribution channel is another concept where different metaphors characterize producer, wholesaler, and retailer usage. Various channel members regard themselves as hired links in a chain, purchasing agents, independent markets, outlets, and captive.

Communicate Ideas More Effectively

The selection and use of a metaphor as a communication vehicle can be justified, even when its simplification or exaggeration of the concept leaves something to be desired. Marketing theories are transmitted to a variety of audiences such as scholars, practitioners, and students—each one with its relevant subaudiences. The right metaphor, in terms of imagery content and dramatic impact, can enable the concept to travel better. Metaphors make learning more memorable, comprising perhaps the most efficient and effective tool for education (Gordon 1966, Petrie 1979).

The Boston Consulting Group's "portfolio analysis" owes at least some of its success to its cast of characters for strategic business units—cash cows, stars, problem chil-
Generate New Metaphors for Further Research

Knowing the inherent presence and value of metaphors in marketing leads to the desirability of developing "generative" metaphors. The purpose of these new metaphors would be: (1) to initiate new ways of thinking about existing or new concepts, and (2) to suggest strategies for future research (Boyd 1979).

"Decision net" provides a new approach to looking in-depth at consumer decision research. Because of the coming of at-home, electronic shopping, a new version of "vertical marketing systems" is proposed in the form of the "offering system." As an alternative to the raging "warfare" metaphor of competition, the "collaborative marketing relationship" between buyers and sellers is articulated.

Research the Consumer's Metaphors

In the marketing discipline's high-priority search for knowledge concerning consumer behavior, no stone should be left unturned—excluding the consumer's metaphor level thinking process and repertoire. Linguistic analysis in general and metaphors in particular have been neglected in the consumer behavior literature. Scanning mass media advertising reveals that this has not been the case among advertising practitioners. To paraphrase the Lakoff and Johnson (1980) title, advertisers crave to know the "metaphors we consume by."

Although some attention has been given to the consumer's meaning, a promising approach to exploring metaphors might come from interpretive research (Pearce and Gronen 1980). This is somewhat akin to the approach of motivation research, dealing with dreams, fear, fun, gestures, taste, psychology of surfaces, and smells. Consumer-related topics would be "brand loyalty" and "brand image."

CLASSIFICATION OF METAPHORS

The three major categories for classifying metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provide a way to recognize, to evaluate, and to communicate metaphorical statements.

Oriential Metaphors

Oriential metaphors organise a whole system of concepts with respect to one another. It is most often expressed in spatial terms—end opposite (up-down, on-off, in-out, central-peripheral, near-far). Most of these seem "real"—more is up, less is down—because they are so natural in terms of our basic physical experiences and cultural values.

For example, "more monetary growth is better"—for the economy, individual firms, and executives (and professors)—focuses on "quantity" but does not necessarily deal with "quality." Other orientational metaphors include: "high and low involvement learning," "higher and lower levels of memory processing," "hierarchy of advertising effects," "long and short distribution channels," and "backward and forward integration."

Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphors describe something fairly abstract in terms of objects and substances. Typical concepts include events, activities, emotions and ideas. Ontological metaphors give these concepts shapes, sizes, and boundaries—often as land areas (territoriality) and visual fields. In this way these concepts can be referred to and quantified, and their causes, goals, and motives can be identified.

Several of marketing's "core" variables fall into the ontological metaphor category: the definition of marketing, consumer satisfaction, competition, marketing strategy, market definition, supported product, business domain, social responsibility, and government regulation. Debates in the marketing literature on the nature, scope, and import of these concepts would hardly be possible without their being metaphorically bounded.

A special case of ontological metaphor involves "personification"—a physical object is further specified as being a person (inflation as adversary, store as friendly). Another special case is "metonymy"—using one entity to refer to another that is related to it (designer label for product, sales representative for company).

Structural Metaphors

Structural metaphors are the richest and most elaborate for delineating concepts. They involve the gestalt and patterns of all properties naturally occurring together.

To explore fully the structure of a metaphor, its basic aspects must be identified: context, progress, strength, basicness, obviousness, directness, and clarity. For the specific metaphor of "marketing communications," a set of attributes can be derived: agent, goal, change, control, responsibility, source, outcome, and success (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, pp. 61-68).

The "marketing concept" is one of the primary structural metaphors in marketing. It can be seen as based on a "close"—some might say personal, open, intimate, sharing—"relationship" between consumers and the organization. Criticism of the metaphor in the light of changing social responsibilities has revised the structure to be a "three party" (triangle) relationship—consumers, organization, and society.

USING METAPHOR IN THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Consider a Variety of Metaphors

The search for marketing metaphors should be as wide as possible. There are many sources from which metaphors can derive, as shown in Figure 1. Marketing metaphors tend to come mainly from a few conventional sources—perhaps another 20/80 rule. These seem to include: machines, warfare, biology, economics, and construction.

The researcher should use his/her individual imagination or group brainstorming to develop metaphorical candidates for a given concept. Prospective metaphors may spring to mind based on an "informed guess" that some similarities exist between the primary and secondary subjects (Boyd 1979). Metaphors should "emerge" from our natural experience as gestalts. How else would one explain such metaphors as "perceived risk" and "diffusion of innovation?"

Explore Each Metaphor Fully

From the long list of prospective metaphors for a given concept should come a short list of those that generate some new insights. This involves exploring each metaphor's "network of entailments"—all the possible similarities between the primary and secondary subjects (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). A goal is to use as many parts of the metaphor as our past experiences and cultural system permit.

A popular metaphor is the "consumer as processor of information" or as "computer." Much scholarly marketing research in this area has been borrowed from cognitive psychology, but a does not mention its metaphorical basis.
Cognitive psychologist Boyd (1979, p. 360), enumerates some entailments of the computer metaphor: thought is a kind of “information processing,” certain cognitive processes are “preprogrammed,” an internal “brain-language” exists for computations, certain information is “encoded” or “indexed” in “memory store” by “labeling,” while other information is “stored” in “images,” and learning is an adaptive response of a “self-organizing machine.”

Evaluate the Metaphor’s Appropriateness

Each of the fully entailed metaphors should be subjected to evaluative criteria. Criteria include:

1. **Vividness**—how memorable and alive the imagery or concreteness evoked by the metaphorical vehicle (Ortony 1975), such as the “trajectory” concept of goal setting for new products and “retail accordian.”

2. **Aesthetic pleasingness**—how attractive the metaphor looks, sounds, or feels (Sternberg et al. 1979), such as “market orchestration” or “marketing myopia.”

3. **Comprehensibility**—how wide the range of aspects the metaphor contributes to understanding the concept (Sternberg et al. 1979), such as “product life cycle.”

4. **Inexpressibility**—how much the metaphor carries extra meanings not encoded in the language (Ortony 1975), such as “product cannibalization.”

5. **Coherency**—how well a set of metaphors describing the same concept fit together (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), such as the elderly marketing as “mature” and “invisible.”

Identify the Metaphor’s Limitations

By their very nature, metaphors have blind spots. They have been characterized as overly simplified (Zikmund 1982), overly concretized (Arndt 1983), and forced to fit (Zaltman et al. 1982).

Limitations of several marketing metaphors follow: “channel captain” as leader overshadows the sharing of power throughout the distribution channel; “word-of-mouth communication” excludes the nonverbal aspects of the process; “consumer information processing” neglects the emotional dynamics; and “consumers as decision makers” disregards types of no pre-decision purchasing.

Introduce the Metaphor in Communication

Finally, the metaphorically clad marketing theory is ready to go public. It can be “tested” on a few close colleagues, or included in a lecture or manuscript. The feedback received may determine whether it should be used again, modified, or quickly forgotten.

In an oral or written presentation, metaphors can be used in several ways: to get attention, to build interest, to develop rapport, to clarify abstract concepts and relationships, to handle transitions, to dramatize key points, to persuade on a deeper level, to answer tough questions, and to provide an ending.

**SUGGESTED RESEARCH**

Several topics concerning metaphors in marketing may deserve further investigation: (1) The measurement of the popularity of the various sources from which marketing metaphors have been obtained. (2) The life cycle analysis of metaphors throughout the history of marketing thought. (3) The criteria for successful (and unsuccessful) metaphors in marketing. (4) The preferred metaphors of the diverse participating groups in the marketing field. (5) The cross-cultural specification of metaphors as they affect multinational marketing.

**REFERENCES**


Lakoff, G., and M. Johnson (1980), Metaphors We Live by, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.


