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Writing Reality: Constructivism, Metaphor, and Cosmology

Cover Page Footnote

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Mary C. Daane

When language instructors teach from the conviction that “words form the floor, walls, and ceiling of our existence” (Nouwen, 1981, p. 31), from a recognition that language is both the foundation and reflection of students’ reality, value systems, experiences, and ways of being in the world, instructors receive and evaluate their students’ discourse as far more significant than accumulations of discrete achievement skills. This constructivist (Ortony 1979) or experientialist (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) perspective sensitizes teachers to a holistic view of their students’ linguistic lives; often constructivist teachers assign activities that encourage students to use “expressive” language, language that is “close to the self” and gives signals about [students] as well as signals about [students’] topic[s]” (Britton, 1982, pp. 96-97). By doing this, the “constructivist” teacher becomes privy to the recurrent themes and metaphors by which students render their identities.

In recent years epistemic theory in many disciplines has drifted from taxonomy to “linguisticity” (Foucault, 1973), resulting in a burgeoning of publications on metaphor. Surprisingly, though, the trend has given rise to very little discussion about the significance of metaphor in writing theory. In fact, Seitz’s “Composition’s Misunderstanding of Metaphor” (1991) notes a paradox in the field’s persistence in viewing metaphor as something to be isolated, controlled, even expunged from student writing and discussions about writing, for the sake of clarity. As Booth (1978) reminds us, “The quality of any culture is in large part the quality of the metaphorists that it creates and sustains” (p. 72).

Metaphors help thinkers and writers forge new connections, relevancies, realities and, at the same time, control the way they view the world. For this reason the discussion of metaphor should no longer be closeted in the literature class; a theoretical understanding of language, metaphor, and the reality they embrace is as essential to contemporary composition pedagogy as it is has always been to poetry and metaphysics. Those who take language seriously and acknowledge its power to change lives and, consequently, the world, recognize that composition classes must be more than laboratories to dissect syntax and paragraph patterns; composition classes must become studios where students’ inchoate potentials can be transformed by the magic of metaphor from the unspeakable within to an articulate without.

Basic Philosophies of Language

Since the time of Aristotle and throughout the history of Western thought,

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“objectivism” (Johnson, 1987) has dominated philosophical approaches to language. Briefly, the objectivist understanding holds that language relates in a one-to-one, precise manner to a reality that is disembodied or separate and outside of human thought, i.e., words have exact meanings that fit the properties of the world we live in. Collaterally, the objectivists consider knowledge fixed and accessible; for them, “the cat sat on the mat” means one and only one thing to all competent speakers of English. Objectivity is possible and necessary for reason; absolute and knowable *truth* exists and may be derived by impersonal and rational analysis. Moreover, the vocabularies of philosophy and science are accurate, and the formulations of these disciplines can correctly describe and predict the universe.

In the twentieth century an alternate understanding of language evolved from the work of such philosophers as Kant (1781/1965), Ricoeur (1976), Vygotsky (1962), and Whorf (1956). This new approach is aphorized in Wittgenstein’s (1953) often cited statement, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” This new point of view led to the now widely-held conviction that the language we generate both creates and communicates a constructed reality, shaping our value systems and our ways of being in the world. Indeed, accepting the breach between the world and the word accounts for the postmodern view of an indeterminate reality.

Those who hold this view of reality argue that *truth* is a product of our culturally determined thought system and our particular experiences within that culture, not of some absolute or neutral set of pan-human concepts. Rorty’s (1990) comment, “Truth is simply a compliment paid to sentences seen to be paying their way” (as cited in Klepp, 1990, p. 118), makes this very point. For constructivists, objectivity is not nullified but understood to remain possible within the framework of cultural supports and limitations. From this stance, rationality appears to rest on both logic and imagination. Therefore, a set of informational propositions may yield many validly reasoned conclusions that will vary individually depending on the experiences, imagination, and available linguistic resources. Accordingly, any individual’s understanding of “the cat sat on the mat” is shaped by earlier personal encounters with, and cultural perspectives on, both cats and mats. Philosophers who acknowledge the human propensity for “seeing-as” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 193) are known as constructivists or experientialists. They view language and imagination as endowments that liberate us from the constraints of absolute meaning and thereby elevate linguistic expression beyond the skill category to a “phenomenon of freedom” (Steiner, 1989, p. 151).

Constructivism and Metaphor

In order to derive a correspondence between metaphor and cosmology, I settle on one point of view as to how metaphors operate or what they do. There are generally three positions on this issue.

First, the substitution view considers metaphors “fuzzy and vague, inessential frills, appropriate for the purposes of the politician and of the poet, but not for those of the scientist, who is attempting to furnish an objective description of

physical reality" (Ortony, 1979, p. 2). This objectivist approach holds that "metaphors are essentially linguistic ornaments for which their more prosaic equivalents can be readily substituted" (Ortony, 1985, p. 153). In that view, Yeats' (1927/1962) lines from "Sailing to Byzantium": "An aged man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick...", are simply an unnecessary embellishment having the semantic equivalent of the literal, drab, but more precise, "An old man is insignificant, frayed, brittle and frail" (p. 95).

A second position on metaphor, the comparative view, has its roots in Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle in "On Poetics" defines metaphor as "the intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars." This belief that metaphor allows language users to propose otherwise similarities differs little from the substitution view, for the comparison view finds "every metaphor to be a condensed or elliptic simile" (Richards, 1936, pp. 35–36). Thus, the comparison view, just another spin on the substitution view, would find Yeats' line an expendable, implied simile approximating, "An old man looks like a tattered coat hanging on a stick."

A third view of metaphor, one that is consistent with the constructivist view, holds that the terms of a metaphor interact to set off a chain of associations that give rise to an altogether new meaning, one that conjures far more than the meaning constituted by the original terms. This view, arising from Richards' discussion of the "interanimation of words" (as cited in Black, 1979), holds that new meaning arises, not from the words themselves, but from a new or startling juxtaposition of words. The interactionist position on Yeats' line would hold that readers bring their own associations, thoughts, feelings, reminiscences about old men, tattered coats, and sticks; thus, individuals' interpretations of the line will vary. The interactionist view is consistent with contemporary reader response theory in describing meaning, not as captured ideas inalterably preserved by the page, but as variable incantations at the juncture of the word, the reader, the culture, and the moment.

In the constructivist universe, both the substitution and the comparison views are inadequate, for if all language is seen as a reflection of the user's view of reality, and if an objective reality is understood to be a myth, then all language is seen to be *more* or *less* removed from the objects and phenomena to which it refers. If nothing in the lexicon conforms directly and absolutely to reality, then everything in the lexicon is a metaphor for that reality. Thus the difference between literal and figurative language is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*. The issue is not whether or not an expression is metaphorical but whether it is metaphorical enough for the average, competent language user to recognize its metaphoricity. Black (1979) and others have differentiated between "live" and "dead" metaphors. A live metaphor is one that is syntactically jarring enough to catch the attention of a reader or listener. On the other hand, dead metaphors are those that have become so automatic that average users barely note their metaphoricity; head of the family, arm of the chair, and foot of the bed are everyday metaphorical expressions we rarely note as such.

Metaphor and Reality

Several commentators have taken exception to the objectivist position that finds metaphors "unimportant, deviant, and parasitic on 'normal usage'" (Ortony,

1979, p. 2). Levin (1979) maintains that when we respond to metaphorical constructions, we do not construe “the utterance so that it makes sense of the world, we construe the world so as to make sense of the utterance” (p. 131). Encountering a metaphor, we complete a quick mental check of the meanings of the terms and conjure an imaginary reality to make that anomalous expression sensible. Thus, the notion that metaphors are aberrant expressions is superseded by the idea that the language is impeccable; just the facts are deranged. Metaphors are to be taken literally; “They mean what they say—what gives is the world” (p. 131).

For those who see truth as a matter of “fitting words to the world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 196), concession to a new reality can imply falsehood and lies. Empson (1951) noted that the truth or falsity of literary works is not the issue; when contracting with a text, readers are expected to rearrange the world to match the writer’s creation.

A prototype of the notion that metaphor creates truth was reified in the works of literary Romantics. Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” (as cited in Salinger, 1966, p. 89), the condition necessary for the reader’s transaction with the text, and Keats’ (1817/1967) “negative capability” (p. 399), the tolerance for the ambiguity of paradox, and Shelley’s (1840/1967) “Defense of Poetry,” which argues that poetry “creates anew the universe” (p. 483) are all concepts that foreshadowed the constructivist position on language.

Identifying poets as seers and visionaries popular to Western stereotypes attests to an understanding that the metaphors of poetry do not stand as merely juxtaposed to logical descriptions of reality, but actually create a transcendent reality for reader consideration. In other words, the truth of language is located in its removal from the world—its otherworldliness. The concept of objective reality makes a faulty backdrop for interpreting linguistic constructions. One contemporary humorist concisely settled the conflict between the objectivist and constructivist points of view: “In cases of major discrepancy [between literature and life] it’s always reality that’s got it wrong....Reality is frequently inaccurate” (Adams, 1980, p. 38).

Just as any consideration of metaphor on a scale polarized between truth and falsity is untenable, so is any attempt to fix discriminations between the literal and the metaphorical. In the constructivist or experientialist view, literal and metaphorical expressions are not separate species but variants of a single breed—human language. We cannot claim that metaphors are present in some texts and absent from others. All texts are rife with metaphors, a few arresting, most veiled in everyday use. This blurring of the literal/metaphorical distinction reflects the postmodern mischief which aims to deconstruct and level many of the pet valuations in Western philosophy’s collection of hierarchical opposites, including true/false, real/fictional, objective/subjective, and literal/metaphorical.

A Constructivist Cosmology

In the objectivist system, metaphor is considered the sole province of the literary mind that is interested in the subtleties and amenities of language. It is not. It is at the very core of our learning, thinking, and writing. Noting the

omnipresence of metaphor, Seitz (1991) reminds the field of the futility of its recommendations that figurative expressions be replaced with literal explanations; "we cannot catch up to the speed of figuration nor somehow hold it still with literal language" (p. 290). We have also seen that the literal can be called metaphorical, that metaphor can be taken literally, that through language humans create their own reality. To complete the circle, we can even claim, with Galeano (1989/1991), that "[p]erhaps we are the words that tell us who we are" (p. 18)—that it is the language that has created the human.

Biolinguists assert that language defines humans and separates them from the animal kingdom; words elevate us "above the silence of plants and the grunts of beasts" (Bartel, 1983, p.75). Dennett (1991) refutes Wittgenstein's comment: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" by claiming "[If] a lion could talk that lion would have a mind so different from the general run of lion minds, that although we could understand him just fine, we would learn little about ordinary lions from him" (as cited in Johnson, 1991, p. 60). To paraphrase Primo Levi (1989), the "whine of an animal" is not a text (p. 172). While animals may signal with their whimpers and whinnies, their noises are neither paraphrastic nor inventive.

The equation of language with creation is nearly as old as Western culture itself. The first chapter, third verse, of Genesis tells of a God who speaks creation (And God said, Let there be light: and there was light) and names our existential opposites, night and day, heaven and earth. The opening chapter of the Gospel of John, first verse, repeats this theme; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The last verse of "The Revelation of John" lists those who will be excluded from messianic Jerusalem: "dogs, fortune tellers, and the sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters, and everyone of false speech and false life," reflecting both a pre- and post-modern stance on the power of language to define reality. The kingdom of God is gained by utterance, not grace.

The great prophets and mystics have always known this, and that is why the great religious texts are built on allegory, parable, proverb, and magical imagery. Jesus, Lao-Tzu, Muhammad, Siddhartha, the Zen Masters, and the Hasidic Zaddiks all worked from a tacit understanding that humans recoil from the bald truth, that seekers are more likely to accept new theological premises when they are presented indirectly. Often the new religious values are disguised in stories involving commonplace situations, such as allegories and parables, or paradoxical puzzlers like those found in the Old Testament book of "Proverbs," the Tao Te Ching, and Zen koans.

Ben Shahn's (1954) telling of the "The Alphabet of Creation," a legend from the *Zohar*, the Kabbalah's primary mystical text, derived from ancient Gnostic tales begins:

Twenty-six generations before the creation of the world, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet descended from the crown of God whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire. They gathered around about God and one after another spoke and entreated, each one, that the world be created through him. (pp. 1-2)

According to the legend, the Lord chose to fashion the heavens and earth with the masculine Beth and the feminine Aleph. Aleph's selection was a reward for her modesty (a conceit that has had for millennia a profound effect on human expectations about women).

In a recent article on quantum cosmology, Primack and Abrams (1995) remind us of another account of creation involving language found in Jewish midrashic literature. "*Genesis Rabbah* 1:1 says: 'The Holy one in creating the universe,...worked from a plan—the Torah'" (p. 71). Moreover, the notion that language can form the universe is not peculiar to the traditions of Judaeo-Christian creationism. The Buddhist monks' chant, "Aouhm," vocalizes from back to front of the mouth, a gloss of all the speaking positions. The gloss itself functions as an auditory metonymy, a symbolic reiteration of the act of creation. If, mythologically speaking, language created the universe, and if we, as members of the universe, have been given power over language, then we, too, have been endowed with the power of creation. "The exercise of human language enacts, albeit on a microscopically humble scale, the divine reflexes of creation, the Logos or 'speaking into being' of the universe" (Steiner, 1971, p. 75). "One word can cripple a human relationship, can do dirt on hope" (Steiner, 1989, p. 58).

Language and metaphor are our human trust; through them we spell our vision of the now and the forever. As humans, our nature is to use them constructively. As teachers, it is our responsibility to empower our students to use their linguistic and metaphorical birthrights to construct and re-construct their intellectual, political, and even their spiritual lives; for by their own metaphors will they be known and will they know. We must teach with the conviction of Vaclav Havel: "Transcendence is the only real alternative to extinction" (as cited in Primack & Abrams, 1995, p. 73). If we fail in this obligation, we risk reverting to the abyss of unspeakability. ☹

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