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Even More on Metaphor: A Conversation with Gareth Morgan

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Even More on Metaphor: A Conversation with Gareth Morgan

Abstract

In this paper we discuss the role and status of metaphor in organization theory with Gareth Morgan. We review his original formulation of metaphor as a device involving the carrying over of properties from a concrete source domain (i.e. a metaphor) to a relatively abstract target domain (i.e. an organization) and develop an alternative perspective which draws attention to the emergent and transitory properties of metaphor. We also explore the scope for complimenting the dominant resonance-based approaches to metaphor-use by advocating the deployment of dissonance-based metaphorical projections.

Keywords: metaphor, metonymy, analogical processes, irony, discourse

Even More on Metaphor: A Conversation with Gareth Morgan

Introduction

Gareth Morgan is widely regarded as one of the leading thinkers and writers within the field of management and organization theory. He has made a massive contribution to our understanding of ‘organizational metaphors’ (Morgan, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1986, 1996, 2011) and the application of sociological paradigms to the study of organizations and organizing (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Morgan, 1984). He is particularly well known for his best-selling book *Images of Organization*¹.

For the purposes of our discussion, we have decided to focus on Morgan’s work on metaphor in two ways. First, we reflect upon “the way of thinking and a way of seeing” (Morgan, 1986:12) perspective on metaphor and consider the take up and representation of his ideas over the past three decades. Second, we engage in a more expansive discussion of alternative ways of thinking about the role and status of metaphor-use in management and organization theory.

Given that we have known Professor Morgan for more than twenty years, and having written extensively on metaphor ourselves (see for example: Grant & Oswick, 1996; Oswick and Jones, 2006; Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002), the interaction presented here unfolded as an emergent conversation rather than as a structured interview. Moreover, the free-flowing and relaxed nature of our discussion resulted in us generating an extensive amount of transcribed text. Rather than try to do justice to all of the issues covered, we have chosen to focus on exploring how metaphors work in organizational theorizing in this paper and consider the relevance of specific established organizational metaphors and the emergence of new ones in a subsequent contribution.

The title of this paper is informed by Morgan’s debate with Pinder and Bourgeois (see Bourgeois & Pinder, 1983; Morgan, 1980, 1983; Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982) regarding the

extent to which metaphors might be considered to be poetic embellishments or indispensable sensemaking devices. During their exchange Morgan wrote a response titled: More on Metaphor: Why We Cannot Control Tropes in Administrative Science (Morgan, 1983) and, given that it seemed timely to revisit the status of metaphor in our field, we felt it was apt to title this piece as Even More on Metaphor.

Revisiting the Role and Status of Metaphor(s)

David: It's nearly 30 years, isn't it, since Images of Organization came out and metaphor is still pervasive in organization studies and seen as valuable, why is that?

Gareth: Well, it's largely because I think it's fundamental to the way of knowing and the point.... is that we have to distinguish between metaphor and metaphors, that's the starting point of it all for me, because Metaphor is ontological, concerned with the nature of being in the sense that as human beings what we're trying to do, we're in a world and subject to all this kind of sense, experience and information and it's a fundamental process. I believe that what goes on is a crossing of information, is a connection of information, and all the rest of it and there's a whole discussion around how that works and so out of this process, a crossing, trying to make sense of information, which is a metaphorical process, metaphors cross over. Metaphors emerge as a way of trying to capture best understanding of what's happening and all metaphors, of course, are contextually-based in the sense that they arise at a particular moment for a particular reason, to capture a particular situation. I'm not trying to suggest there's a deliberate metaphorical process here, it's much more about information, a spontaneous emergent process, but that's why I think metaphors and metaphor are not going to go away and so...

David: So, it's as if we can't help ourselves. As human beings, we actually metaphorize, if that's the right term.

Gareth: Yes. Exactly, and I think that the... some of the new insights and developments in the theory of metaphor are likely to come from brain science as opposed to philosophy, for example. I honestly believe that that's where the validation for some of this thinking is ultimately going to come from and so that's why metaphors are so important, why they won't go away, because they're fundamental to the whole human way of knowing.

David: A way of thinking², as you've said.

Gareth: Yes, exactly, and that for me is one of the biggest distinctions we've got to make in the metaphor debate. It's the ontological versus the epistemological: metaphor as a process versus metaphors as the theories or images that we're using to capture the experiences to which we're trying to relate.

Cliff: I wonder as well, as a process, my kind of view on it if I think about the last 25, 30, 40 years, that a lot of the literature has been dominated by a psychological view of metaphor as a process, so an individual uses a metaphor to create greater insight. I wonder about the sociological potential of metaphors, the way in which it can be more than a purely cognitive process with an individual sitting in the dark room thinking about metaphors. They can, as it were, create their own reality, whereas if metaphors are used socially in conversation where you're... again, to use your expression in your early work, applying the different lenses³ in real time and having a conversation around that, I just wonder whether we kind of miss a trick with metaphors, that we don't look at them as multiple perspectives in real-time to develop insight by simultaneously applying them. You know? I just think that dialogue has so much scope for... I think innovation, if we went and studied a software company down the road - one of these kind of tech start-ups - they're using generative metaphorical processes all the time and it's like this and it's like that, but they're not focusing on one metaphor, they're focusing on a number. I tend to think that with Images of Organisation, one of its strengths was its weakness. It was so persuasive,

as an account, that I think people stopped thinking about metaphor-use in other ways and they focused on evocative “organization as...” metaphors. So that’s... it’s a good thing, it had a massive, and still has, a massive impact. But, in one sense, people started to find it so persuasive; they homed in on that way of thinking and they haven’t kind of stretched and challenged it in other directions as much as they perhaps could have done.

Gareth: I think there’s a lot to that, because it gets captured in the idea of... ‘Morgan’s Eight Metaphors’, right? It becomes about the metaphors rather than the process and it’s interesting, because I’ve been very clear that for me a metaphor is always about generating partial insight, partial truth and it’s about constructive falsehoods in the sense that every metaphor is a distortion, right? Literally as we know it’s not correct, so that you’ve got partial truths, constructive falsehoods and so you’re into a process of constant self-organising of knowledge. If you’re true to the nature of metaphor, you pursue the weaknesses as much as you would the strengths and so it’s this paradoxical phenomenon which pushes you into a much more metaphor as a process, as a basis of dialogue, as a way of self-edification, a mode of conversation, rather than a fixed point of the metaphor, which is, I think, an interpretation sometimes put on the work.

David: Do you think there’s much in the idea that you can push a metaphor too far?

Gareth: Or you could believe it? That’s fatal, right? In the sense that you’re forgetting the fact that there’s always going to be a downside to the metaphor and the metaphor is being evoked, as I said earlier, in a particular context for a particular purpose. Not consciously, but yes, I think, yes if you become entrapped by your metaphor, you’ve gone too far. But notice that it’s being trapped by a metaphor, it’s not about the process, and this I think is where the next line of development might be, because it will bring you very closely to the type of work that you’ve been engaged in, understanding dialogue, narrative and the way it all unfolds.

Towards Alternative Ways of Thinking

Cliff: I wonder about one of the implications [of metaphor-use] - that people often assume that metaphors are unidirectional. So this idea of going right back to Lakoff and Johnson's stuff⁴ - you understand a relatively abstract phenomena through a concrete one. I wonder whether that's too constraining. -Maybe it's nice on occasions to have two abstract domains, or to take two relatively concrete ones and look for unusual quirky elements within... so I think maybe even how we select the points of reference in comparison can sometimes be kind of quite constraining. Moreover, I do wonder though that if we talk about 'the process', more recently commentators like Joep Cornelissen⁵ have started to challenge some of the conventional wisdom around metaphor. Drawing on people like Fauconnier and Turner⁶, he argues that the use of metaphor involves a process of 'conceptual blending'. It's not so much that you understand one thing through another, but rather that you juxtapose two things to create some sort of third synthetic insight. It's a 'correspondence view' of metaphor (i.e. a continual to-ing and fro-ing between domains, rather than a comparison view (i.e. a carrying over from one domain to another). So if you look at an 'organisation as machine', if you do that, you're likely to find out things about the machine, as much as you do about an organisation would be his kind of take. What's your view on that? Do you buy into that or not really?

Gareth: Well, obviously you can blend metaphors and move from one metaphor to another, the whole idea of the correspondence notion links into whether your theory corresponds with the world out there as opposed to being a construct to navigate the world out there and so I'm sure that you can create all kinds of different permutations of metaphor and how it should be used. The thing that always strikes me though, is people who are always trying to find 'the way', right, trying to get a kind of definitive way of thinking about this domain, and I'm not sure that's what it's all about, because the whole idea of the playful

nature of metaphor, and we don't want to make it playful in the sense of just play, play, play, play, play... of having fun; it's more loosening up and not being driven by the attempt to be absolutely rigorous and definitive about the way it works. So, those ideas have some merit, but they will also miss something in the process, like critique is ultimately constructing the other, right, as a way of trying to make one's position and so this is what happens, you offer a theory, you offer an idea, someone takes an opposite view, etc. etc. and out of the conversation something interesting happens.

Cliff: So what you're saying really, is that they're just different. They're different ways of doing things.

Gareth: Exactly.

David: There is however a directional purpose, isn't there? Conceptual blending doesn't allow for that, because you were saying... admittedly, this is your interpretation of the work, but that you take two concepts and you can learn about both concepts. But, actually when people are playing with metaphor or using metaphor, there's always a direction, they're applying one concept to another concept, not...

Cliff:It's purposeful.

David: Yes, that's right. That I think is how metaphor generally is used, even in sort of everyday conversation. There's direction to it, you're not backtracking, if you like, to the original concept.

Metaphorical Chickens or Literal Eggs?

Gareth: Can I read you something? It came out of some notes that I'd made, right, and I discovered them on the train this morning, and I don't know if it will relate to this directly, but I think it's an interesting idea and it's based around 'where do metaphors come from?'. Because that is one of the key issues. I'm just going to read them here, because I think it

may create a little bit of a conversation: “mind struggles to make sense of the world and then leaves a path of insight behind it”⁷. So, in other words, the mind is creating, struggling, to deal with the world, and there’s a residual pattern of understanding that comes out the moment, comes out of the interaction or what have you. So basically what we have here is a kind of emergent view of meaning, of where it’s coming from, and so the question, a question, comes out of this, and I may not be reproducing it accurately: ‘Does the brain have metaphors, analogies or simile forced on itself, because of its own cognitive limitations?’ In other words, if you see metaphor as an important part of that residual pattern, has it been in any way a kind of conscious type of understanding, or has it... is it something that’s emerged because the brain is trying to force connections in an almost a random kind of way as opposed to a concrete purposive way. So this is an important point... Finding answers is easier than defining questions and so if you start to look then at the digital world and everything, a random network contains solutions waiting to be discovered to problems not yet defined and so what we’re talking about here is... it’s a very interesting idea, it’s a metaphor that’s coming from search engines actually, that search starts with answers, not questions and this is the way the whole search process has gone.... So the reason I’m reading this here, is because... all the time in trying to talk about metaphor we try to codify the insights that come from it, or take the example of what is the more robust way of looking at metaphor. I think it’s far more spontaneous than all that and I like that idea of the mind almost going to a solution, almost automatically and it’s that kind of grab. If you think about the way a metaphor emerges in conversation, we’re not conceptually analysing what’s going on, we’re going to the metaphor as the best way of capturing what we see and what we experience and what we feel, whether it’s right or wrong, whether we’re comparing or whether we are just thinking. I think it’s much more emergent as a process.

Cliff: I think... yeah, I really buy into that. The thing for me that still remains within that and something you kind of mentioned along the way there, is how metaphor fits into the process, is it that we're having kind of pre-metaphorical thoughts that then get articulated or crystallised or given some sort of resonance and purchase through metaphor? Or, is it that the metaphor is the very part of the thought process? So I'm not sure whether it's a bit like thought to language, it's almost like within the thought is there a metaphorical element right at the inception or is it that we have some thought and then we almost kind of search cognitively for the metaphor to fit it?

Gareth: Yes, well it's interesting because the brain is in a way the metaphor for the computer and the computer and search and all the rest of it feeds back and so it's a kind of circular process. But you see the point is that what we're seeing is this residual pattern; it's what's left over in terms of metaphors and embedded in language, right, and history and it's filtered out, like some metaphors go nowhere or they're for the moment, they're not going to resonate in a longer frame. Others will take hold and perhaps this is what becomes the basis for the lasting metaphors - the ones that are really built into language, into thought, into mythology, into the way we see things. I really do believe though, one of the fundamental points, I talk about it in Images of Organisation I believe, is how metaphor is about understanding the unknown through the known, right? And so this is directly parallel to the solutions, waiting for the problems, and so basically you go to what you know to understand the unknown. It's virtually impossible to create a metaphor of the unknown, because you've got no reference point. So this... it's very interesting.

Cliff: But within that, and just to be playful, how do you know what you don't know, to know that what you do know will fit what you don't know?

Gareth: Well, you don't, it's intuitive. It's muddling through, I had to use that idea.

Cliff: So is it... but I'm wondering is if... there must be something that's partially known about the unknown that resonates with the known to create...

Gareth: Yes, that's exactly it. You've got the word, 'resonates'.

Cliff: But in doing that are we kind of... is it in one sense therefore not entirely a kind of, a new process as much as a process of continuity rather than discontinuity? So in other... let me put it in another way, so we could actually start from the position, and you mentioned that metaphor is as much about difference as similarity and the way things...

Gareth: Yes.

From Resonance to Dissonance

Cliff: We could start from a position of dissonance. We could actually ask ourselves the way that something isn't like something else and that might generate alternative, different types of insight.

Gareth: Yes, you could.

Cliff: And I wonder whether we kind of... I don't know whether in our pre-programming we're pre-disposed to look for similarities in phenomenon rather than look for differences. I'm not really sure.

Gareth: Well academia's looking for differences and you can argue that's what propels it all, but the point is that could be a useful technique or tool, but I think that the fundamental thing is to find out what's similar, because that's what helps to make something sensible to oneself.

David: It makes me think about this whole issue of the difference between tame and wicked and how we go about resolving, particularly wicked problems, it's much more about an accent on the question. So you start with a problem, but it's the questions that solve the problem and you have to think about. It'd be interesting to sort of overlay the metaphorical

or metaphor... the process of metaphor on that, because of course the tame problem is just a problem, you can just apply any metaphor to that to solve it very quickly, there is a known, whereas a wicked is an unknown. It's something you haven't encountered before.

Gareth: The tame are the technical ones, right?

David: Yeah, well they're just ones that you've encountered before, so you know.

Gareth: Yes, exactly. It's fascinating though because... I don't want to play it out too much here, but that whole idea of the modern search engine, it presents... the answers are there and that's what's encoded in the database and the questions activate the answers, right?

David: Yes.

Gareth: Which is, if you go back to the whole process of metaphor, this I think is what's happening, you've got a residue of experience, if I can put it that way, and you're encountering a new experience and so you try to encounter, understand, the new through the old, through the pre-existing, and this is where the crossing over ontologically that I believe is in the whole nature of human being, is basically the process that's going on here. So metaphors, metaphor as a process is going on in this way and then it's resulting in all these things that we as academics will analyse and then refine.

Gareth: You see you come back to it, it's this interplay of metaphor that's important and if you go with the view that metaphor is inherently... it creates insight, but it's inherently limited, inherently distorting and that it will never give you the whole picture, then automatically you should be looking for counter-metaphors as a source of overcoming the limitations of what you're doing. So it's... Cliff, it's this point you've made about paying attention to the differences, right. The limitations are the down side and I think this has huge, huge impact for science, because crudely put, science becomes driven by metaphor, elaborated through metonymical reductions and through the concepts that are given, that are then basically treated as an... almost an objective construct. So you look for an

objective affirmation of the concept, but in the meantime, you're then reducing and narrowing your vision and at the very same time there are these other dimensions to what you're studying being eliminated from view. So this is where I think the interplay of metaphor in science, for example... or at least awareness that what you're doing is mining a metaphor in a reductive way. I think it's so vital in for philosophy of science point of view that this be understood.

Cliff: Is there... and I don't know the answer to this, I'm just raising it. Is there a sense in which that reduction reaches a point at which the reduction then reverses or flips? So in the kind of almost Kuhnian sense of paradigmatic shift⁸, is it that the reduction leads to kind of a point which is reductionist to the point it no longer has meaning and it no longer works and there is a flip, or not? I'm not sure whether it's this kind of hegemonic struggle position, or just something that becomes so stale and so well understood that something else emerges instead.

Gareth: Or generates anomalies.

Cliff: Yeah.

Gareth: Like it just... that's where the anomalies come from. What is the anomaly? It's something that lies outside the explanation of the theory.

Cliff: Yes. And the reduction has to occur for things to be outside, because if you don't reduce it to begin with and it's broad, the anomalies are within it. It's only by working through to the kind of pure metonymical reduction that you can see the things outside of it. So you almost have to... almost focus on reduction that then leads to a process of looking beyond and the generative process beyond that.

Gareth: Exactly. So the thesis leads to the antithesis, the driving argument and the style of research that you engage in will lead other people then to create the opposite and so going back to the critiques of your work, right. It's inevitable, whatever you say, someone else

is going to have a go and take it on in terms of the limits to what it is that you were saying. So it's this... and as academics, as scientists, we've got to engage in reduction, otherwise we're just poets, right? —We're just engaging in... or people in the domain of literature that we're not in the domain of science or science, in quotes, which most academics in our domain would see themselves as being engaged. I'm really taken by this and it's this being expressed by this notion of the other: thesis - antithesis. Everybody is creating a counter-position and so in order to create that counter-position, I've seen a huge... in a lot of critiques of my work - you create it as almost a straw man...

Cliff: I've got to be honest though, I quite like it when people do that, because it forces me to think through in different ways the way in which I make sense of phenomena. So it's not that I come round to a way of thinking, it's that I think, well this bit and that bit...

David: Well, you explain context...

Cliff: Yeah, but it's not so much that I develop a better reinforced rationale for my thinking, it's that I think it forces me to re-think, in subtle ways at least, the way I think. So in other words you have to go further, you have to... but it's not about explanation, that's the thing, it's not about making it clearer. I think it forces us to shift, albeit in different ways, not to accommodate entirely the other person at all, but it forces us to think through our thinking. I'd rather talk to people that don't agree with me, than people that do, and I've learnt most, I think, from people that don't take the same perspectives on phenomena as me.

Gareth: I'm 100% with you, it's all about dialogue and it's all about trying to refine your understanding and you refine your understanding through critique. Another thought that I've been working on in response to this stuff is whether metonymy sometimes is the spark for the development of metaphor. You know the way of presenting it is how a metaphor creates a mode of understanding is through the naming of the elements of the metaphor, or

what you mean as you... for yourself articulate what the metaphor means or you articulate for others, that naming process occurs, but equally going back to the way the brain self-organises knowledge, then it wouldn't be a one way street. Actually metonymical reduction can provide the spark for another metaphor or impetus for one. So I think it goes around and it's linking to the importance of the point you're making, Cliff, about the different, right. In making a detailed statement about something, you may provide that impetus to something else happening and that's how it becomes open and self-organising.

The Scope for Other Tropes

Gareth: There's one other thing that I wanted to put on the table here. If you look at the main tropes there's metaphor, metonymy, there's synecdoche and there's irony. And, I've only focused on the first two, particularly the former and the interesting thing is whether there's any legs to the others, and I'll be provocative here, just throw it out in other words. I think in a way irony is just metaphor playing on the opposite of what you might think. You know what I mean? Organisation is chaos. That's what I think. It's finding a metaphor that's almost a complete deconstruction of the original idea and so, okay, I think there's a lot that you can do with irony, but I don't see it as anything that's really different from metaphor, other than... and I'm pushing this out for discussion.

David: That's a hard... it also depends... and it's a great question... it also depends on how you see the tropes, because some people talk about metaphor as almost a master trope, don't they, and...

Gareth: Yes, that's the way I see it.

David: ...flowing from.

Gareth: Because it's a crossing.

David: As opposed to independent...

Cliff: I take the opposite view. The opposite view being that irony requires sophisticated processes of cognition in its own right. In order to generate metaphor, you have to understand some points of similarity. In order to generate irony, you have to understand the points of difference and similarity.

David: Right.

Cliff: Because in order to create irony you have to be able to say how something which is different could be folded back on itself.

David: Right.

Cliff: Yeah, the 'juxtaposing of opposites' is irony.

Gareth: Yeah.

Cliff: So, take for instance, an example provided by Dolly Parton. She said: "it takes a lot of money to look this cheap". So you have to understand both the kind of idea of 'glamour' and 'cheapness' in order to fold them back on themselves. Just like you have to understand 'chaos' and 'organization' to be able to then think about the points of similarity. So I think actually it's... ultimately... I don't like the idea of metaphor being of higher status than irony. And, actually to go back to something you said earlier on, the processes are still metaphorical in nature. But, I think the actual phenomena, metaphor and irony, are different, but I think the process is the same process.

Gareth: You've got it, and that's the crossing, right, it's the juxtaposition and that's why... so that the concepts themselves are just products of this and I agree with you. So what we're saying then, recognise the huge role of irony as a metaphorical form...

Cliff: And that's the problem for me, some positions or perspectives become overused or dominant. Metaphor has tremendous value. Irony has tremendous value. The processes are both metaphorical, albeit they play out with slightly different emphasis. But, I think irony is tremendously underused. So, I'll give you an example of something which I throw out

with classes, which forces them to think. I use the expression, I say, “management consultants are like social activists, it’s just that social activists care more and they don’t get paid.” Now that forces students to think about ‘similarity-in-difference’, and that can create new insight in the way that if you said, “A management consultant’s like a navigator”, then that’s, because... that’s metaphorical rather than ironic, you’re not going to necessarily generate the same insights. So you can... although they’re similar processes, the slightly different emphasis can lead to different outcomes and I think they’re both valuable. But, I don’t think irony has been used as fully as a generative tool in organisational theorising in the way that it could have done. Probably because we haven’t had someone write *Ironies of Organization* in the way we’ve had somebody writing *Images of Organization*, so it’s back to the way you dominate the field. It’s your fault!
[Laughter]

Gareth: Well, that’s what people seem to accuse me of, opening up the field and closing it down simultaneously. Yes, that’s absolutely it, and that’s a take away for me for sure. It’s not used enough as a generative tool.

David: It’s never... no one seems to explore it. I don’t know if there’s value in it because I’ve never thought about it, if I’ve got to be honest.

Gareth: It’s so confusing, you have to think it through...

David: It’s the poor relative of the four tropes.

Gareth: Yeah, exactly, but that’s a very good point, I think. It’s pushing the boundaries. Irony is a form of metaphor, it’s the same process, so it’s not metaphor versus irony, it’s a type... it’s a particular use of metaphor, but it’s one that challenges and pushes the boundaries much more so than a simple metaphor would do. That’s very nice.

Concluding Thoughts

The conversation with Gareth Morgan can be seen as an instance of ‘generative dialogue’ (Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, 2004) insofar as the process of real-time co-construction produced insights beyond those initially held by any of the interlocutors. The unfolding discussion also had a discernible narrative flow as it moved from initially questioning the dominant perspective on metaphors, to a consideration of other ways of thinking, and then proposing an alternative and potentially productive direction for future metaphorical inquiry.

In terms of specific insights, three main things have arisen. First, the discussion has drawn attention to the need to compliment the logic of metaphorization and the thought processes attached to it (i.e. understanding an abstract target domain through the carrying over of properties from a concrete source domain) with more provisional, “correspondence-based forms of metaphorization” (where there is an interaction between quasi-concrete target and source domains which generates a new synthetic domain/construct).

Second, opening up to a more tentative approach also draws attention to the emergent qualities of metaphor (i.e. residual patterns of understanding and the grab of solutions which search for problems). Engaging with this perspective requires us to relax the extent to which we see metaphors as being relatively ‘fixed’ and ‘concrete’ in nature.

Finally, the formulation of “irony-based metaphorization” highlights the need to consider points of dissimilarity and dissonance with regard to target and source domains. Moreover, counterbalancing the dominance and privileging of resonance-based metaphors with dissonance-based forms of metaphorical inquiry offers significant potential for generating innovative organizational insights and new ways of thinking.

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Notes

1. The first edition of Images of Organization sold just under 250,000 copies.
2. The notion of metaphors being a ‘way of thinking’ is taken from Morgan (1986).
3. This refers to the use of different metaphors as being comparable to looking at an object using different lenses (Morgan, 1986).
4. See Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
5. See Cornelissen (2005).
6. See Fauconnier and Turner (2002).
7. This extract is taken from: Turin (2012).
8. See Kuhn (1962).

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