Łukasz Sułkowski
Academy of Management SWSPiZ

Types of metaphors of organisation

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present the variety and types of metaphors and give examples of their use in organisational discourse. Metaphoric thinking is a useful approach to make out the organisation and is permanently blended in the management learning process. Metaphors constitute a part of language and their changing is connected with transformation of the way of thinking and speaking and, thus, organisation actions. Depending on the standpoint taken, a metaphor may be perceived as a useful technique or a foundation to make out the organisation. One must see, however, that using a metaphor should not be totally unrestricted. Metaphoric thinking sets on certain tracks, indicates hidden properties of the examined object, prompts to creative thinking, however, complete identification of the described object with the metaphor is pointless. Employment and discovery of the *quasi*-metaphoric process for management interpretation should lead to a better cognition of the organisational life[1].

The nature of metaphoric thinking in management

The issue of metaphors of organisation has been precisely defined and developed by G. Morgan and other authors[2]. Organisations are perceived and understood in

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[1]   Porównaj: C.M. Schmidt, *Methaphor and Cognition: A Cross-Cultural Study of Indigenous and Universal Constructructs in Stock Exchange Reports*, Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, 2002, issue 5, http://www.immi.se/intercultural/.

[2]   G. Morgan, *Obrazy organizacji*, PWN, Warszawa 1997. P.K. Manning, "Metaphors of the Field: Varieties of Organizational Discourse." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24: 660–671, 1979. H. Tsoukas, "The Missing Link: A Transformational View of Metaphors in Organizational Science." *Academy of Management Review*, 16: 566–585, 1991. Morgan, G. "Paradigms, Metaphors and Puzzle Solving in Organization Theory." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25: 605–622, 1980.

various ways. Gareth Morgan believes that in the process of interpretation of the 'organisational life' and the organisation itself we use images or metaphors[3]. As part of the cognitive function it is used when we aim at understanding of a part of reality through other part[4]. It offers a possibility of comparing the organisations and management to other objects or processes. Therefore, metaphoric reasoning concerns both researchers and theorists as well as managers and management practitioners[5].

Apart from G. Morgan's proposal, one will find many other metaphors in management that will emphasise other approaches to organisational reality, e.g. organisation – theatre, organisation – temple, organisation – text[6]. John J. Clancy has identified six main metaphors employed in business: journey, game, war, machine, organism, and society[7]. War metaphors may be applied to the analysis of strategic activities of businesses on the market[8]. Farid A. Muna proposed seven metaphors on management that aptly refer to the description of Arab cultures (candle, iceberg, tripod, transit lounge, mosaic, helicopter, and bridge)[9]. Polish literature offers metaphors of organisation proposed by S. Kwiatkowski, M. Kostera, and Ł. Sułkowski[10].

Types of metaphors

Among various types of metaphors emerging from professional literature several that are used more frequently in terms of management may be pointed.

1. A cognitive metaphor associates the object with an experience outside of the object for cognitive purposes and is the fundamental type of metaphor.
2. A core metaphor, which constitutes a fundamental method of interpretation, is used in management with reference to understanding of the organisational culture as the organisation itself.
3. An extended metaphor allows to develop one interpretation plot. If it is assumed that the organisation is a theatre then their participants may be

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[3] Tamże, s. 11-14.

[4] G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1980, s. 81.

[5] R.L. Sproull, *A Scientist's Tools for Business: Metaphors and Modes of Thought.* Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997.

[6] M. Kostera, *Postmodernizm w zarządzaniu*, PWE, Warszawa 1996, s. 41.

[7] J.J. Clancy, *The Invisible Powers. The Language of Business*, Lexington Books, Lexington 1989.

[8] Heracleous, L. and C. D. Jacobs. 2008a. Crafting strategy: The role of embodied metaphors. *Long Range Planning*, 41: 309-325; Ph. Kotler, Marketing, Rebis, Poznań 2005; Ł. Sułkowski, *Czy rynek można postrzegać jako pole bitwy*, w: „Przegląd Organizacji", nr 10, 2003.

[9] F.A. Muna, 7 *Metaphors on Management. Tools for Managers in the Arab World*, Gower, Burligton 2003, s. XV-XIX.

[10]   M. Kostera, *Postmodernizm w zarządzaniu*, PWE, Warszawa 1996; S. Kwiatkowski, *, O psie, płocie, paradygmacie teorii organizacji i przyszłości praktyki zarządzania*, "Przegląd Organizacji", 1995: nr 12, 1996: nr 1; Ł. Sułkowski, *Temple, church and religion metaphors in values management*, "Management", nr 1, 2008

perceived as actors, strategic options as different scenarios, and organisational cultures as acting styles, etc.

4. A mixed metaphor is one that leaps from one comparison to another, causing surprise or giving a paradoxical feeling. In an organisational discourse such role is assigned to postmodern use of a variety of conflicting metaphors (e.g. 'an organisation is a kaleidoscope which transformed into a happening once the machine collapsed').

5. An absolute metaphor is a linguistically non-reducible concept[11]. A prerequisite to use this kind of metaphors may be the ambiguity and the problem with reductionism of basic notions of our sciences: such as organisation, management, strategy, structure, culture, etc.

6. Literature, didactic, and therapeutic metaphors also play other roles than just cognitive. In management, metaphoric thinking is used e.g. to educate managers and to diagnose organisational cultures[12].

7. A dead metaphor is one in which the sense of a transferred image is absent; as in 'to take the reins' or 'hold sway' when the physical act of grasping and holding is referred to like it was in the beginning of the metaphor, yet it historically vanished. However, the linguistic and spatial association remains in human mind and directs the way of reasoning.

8. Metonymy is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept[13]. An example could be the phrase 'organisation axes the employees', as indeed it is not the organisation that axes but the managers employed in the organisation.

9. An implied metaphor is indirect and refers to a bigger lot, e.g. 'people are like cog-wheels of the organisational machine'.

10. A latent metaphor signifies that certain words may be omitted due to the communicational economy, e.g. the sentence 'he was sacked' means that someone was made redundant.

11. Synecdoche is a figure of speech, a type of metonymy, in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole thing or *vice versa*[14]. Using of a synecdoche for management discourse may be illustrated by the following sentences: 'The manager has not decided yet. This demiurge needs time.'

12. An active metaphor is in the process of introduction, therefore, it should be clearly explained, e.g. 'the culture of this organisation is like bipolar disorder, once it pushes employees towards hyperactivity, other they fall into depression and catatonic stupor'.

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[11] G. Cantón, César, "La metaforología como laboratorio antropológico" (pags. 9–25), estudio introductorio a: Hans Blumenberg, Conceptos en historias, Síntesis 2003, 303 pags.

[12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor.

[13] http://sjp.pwn.pl/slownik/2482594/metonimia.

[14] http://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo.php?id=3982076.

13. A submerged metaphor is one that hides the first part which is interpreted through the second part, e.g. 'a manager goes with the flow thanks to grounded employees'.
14. A conceptual metaphor offers a broad and universal interpretation framework that often is also an extended metaphor, e.g. 'life consists in organisation'.
15. A pataphor is an extreme, pointless, exaggerated form of metaphor aiming at drawing somebody's attention. The sentence 'an organisation, this large organism, where managers are the head, employees are the hands and the management system forms the inner organs' includes a pataphor.
16. A simple metaphor is an accepted and identified, short and relatively unequivocal comparison in use, e.g. 'to fire'.
17. A complex metaphor uses more than one comparison. For instance, the sentence 'the roots of organisation grow in the bedrock of western culture' is a double metaphor because of the terms 'roots' and 'bedrock'[15].

Cognitive typology of metaphors

Five epistemological positions that define the significance of metaphoric thinking may be presented.

• Neopositivism

Metaphors do not play a significant cognitive role as they do not reflect the organisational reality, but they may play a creative role – they spur imagination and encourage to look for original solutions. A machine or organisation metaphor may be interpreted in neopositivism categories.

• Rationalism

Metaphors of organisation are contained within presuming by analogy, which may, assuming the position of methodological pluralism, be included in scientific methods. In this meaning there are few fitting metaphors of organisation and management as they must reflect the key properties and relations of the described object[16]. Rational interpretation is often used in reference to a 'learning' organisation.

• Cognitivism

Metaphors are basic structures to interpret organisational reality present in language, and thus, in the way of thinking. Creating a metaphor is a spontaneous, linguistic, and cultural process that organises a field for a discourse around a certain basic metaphor. An example of such *quasi*-metaphors could be forming of sentences around a source metaphor, e.g. 'an organisation is a machine' or 'an organisation is a container'[17].

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[15] http://literaryzone.com, metaphor, Internet.
[16] J. Niemczyk, *Analogie w naukach o zarządzaniu*, w: „Organizacja i kierowanie", nr 3 (109), 2002, s. 17.
[17] O. Jäkel, *Metafory w abstrakcyjnych domenach dyskursu*, Universitas, Kraków 2003, s. 229-235.

- Pragmatism

A pragmatic approach describes metaphor as a tool for action. Transfer of ideas on organisation onto different objects may serve as diagnosis or initiation of actions. Such an approach seems to be assumed by G. Morgan in his 'Images of Organisation'. A metaphoric analysis is to improve a organisation.

- Postmodernism

Metaphors of organisation are only 'linguistic games'; they are non-commensurable and open to any use. One may imagine a metaphor comparing the organisation to any chosen object. It may be metaphorically compared to: an organism, a text, time, a black hole, a pair of shoes or a dog. Metaphoric relations do not respect cause-and-effect relations and do not have to offer any cognitive contents. One does not have to know the object to which he or she compares, the only thing needed is the idea of it. The value of metaphor does not depend on the metaphor itself but on the interpreter. An example of a metaphor using the postmodern approach may be a 'vibrating' organisation.

- Criticism

Metaphors have also been proposed by the authors of CMS paradigm. Their purpose is mainly to criticise the predominant movement in the theory and practice of management. Among the metaphors there are: management as an disturbed communication, mystification, cultural drug, colonisation of power[18].

Conclusion

The use of metaphors may be a useful tool to understand and manage organisations. Principally, as mentioned in the article, as we deal with a variety of metaphor types which are often used implicitly in the management discourse. The described metaphoric approach toward management is applied both in research as well as in managerial and consulting practice all over the world[19]. However, in Poland the knowledge of the idea and method of metaphors is not particularly common among researchers, not to mention managers. Therefore, the knowledge and use of metaphoric thinking in organisational discourse should be extended.

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