

## Metaphoric Representation of Nature

Yan Ji

Foreign Languages School, Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, China

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Nature, Ecolinguistics

**Abstract:** Metaphors not only structure how we perceive and think but also how we should act. There has recently been growing interest in the role of metaphors in nature conservation. This article analyzes how it affects the way to conceptualize the environment from the multiplicity, duality and cultural diversity of metaphors. An ecolinguistics perspective on metaphors in representing nature is then suggested to improve upon use of language for a harmonious relationship with nature.

### 1. Introduction

Since George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), metaphors are no longer seen as merely superficial and superfluous linguistic ornaments, but are considered as indispensable conceptual tools of thinking, talking, and acting. The most common way of describing metaphor in cognitive science is that metaphor is a mapping from a source domain to a target domain. The target domain is the area being talked about. Importantly, metaphors set up reasoning patterns-metaphorical reasoning or analogical reasoning: an inductive style of argumentation that works by presenting a particular case as "being like", or sharing features with, another case such that we should react in the same way'. Metaphorical reasoning involves coming to conclusions about the target domain based on concepts that are drawn from the source domain. For example, in LOVE IS A JOURNEY, the target domain of love is talked about with what's physical and embodied in the source domain of journey. Admittedly, metaphors are heuristic devices for the translation of something abstract into something concrete and shedding light on new and unknown phenomena through familiar ones.

As it is unrealistic to think we could capture in a few words the immensely complex material reality represented through such terms as "global warming", "greenhouse gases", "sinks" and "pollution", metaphorical terms are widely employed in ecological discourse to represent highly variable environmental issues and global climate change. How to conceptualize the environment is crucial: it matters how we talk about our environment and vastly affects the future of our earth and every living being on it.

### 2. The Multiplicity of Metaphors in Representing Nature

Once it is acknowledged that the use of metaphor is inescapable and indispensable, however, we are confronted with the problem of the sheer multiplicity of metaphors. A wide range of familiar metaphors like 'alien species', 'native species', 'exotic species', 'habitat disturbance', 'invasion', 'forest fragmentation' and 'climate change' all of which implicitly rest upon beliefs as to what nature should look like. Philippon (2004) has provided us with a more extensive, although not exhaustive, list of metaphors for nature. Nature can be compared to a particular place (frontier, garden, park, wilderness, utopia), to a friend or family member (self, mother, father, sister, brother, wife, husband, partner), an actor (god or goddess, minister, monarch, lawyer, selective breeder, enemy), a network (web, community, tapestry), a machine (clock, engine, computer, spaceship), a state of being (virgin, harmony, balance), a mode of communication (book), a built object (bank, sink, storehouse, pharmacy, lifeboat, home), or to a contested landscape (battlefield, commons) (Philippon 2004: 16). Confronted with this diversity and heterogeneity of metaphors for nature, many environmental philosophers and environmental activists still react with the attempt to reduce

this multiplicity and search for the one best metaphor for nature. While we attempt to investigate how effective metaphors are in restoring nature by questioning various metaphorical constructions of nature and their advantages and disadvantages.

### **3. The Duality of Metaphors in Restoring Nature**

Some theorists put this quite dramatically in terms of “metaphors we live by” (Lakoff & Mark 1980) or “metaphors we die by” (Romaine 1996).

In addition to the clever technologies, wily policies and ethical revaluations that we shall need to respond to environmental crisis, we shall need better, less anthropocentric metaphors.

(Garrard 2012: 205)

It matters which metaphors we choose to live by. If we choose unwisely or fail to understand their implications, we will die by them.

(Romaine 1996: 192)

#### **3.1 Web Metaphor**

If one were to plot energy exchange within and across trophic levels, the resultant networks would form what appears to be a web—hence the term “food web. A metaphor which does include humans within nature is NATURE IS A WEB. A frequently quoted expression of the metaphor is the following:

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.

(Stibbe 2015:72)

The importance of NATURE IS A WEB is that it conveys the metaphorical entailment that “humans are one part of a wider ecological system and have the responsibility to understand their impacts on the various components of the broader system” (Raymond et al. 2013: 540). Ecologists are beginning to realize that the extinction of a species has the potential to create a ripple effect throughout the entire food web. However, not all network connections are the same in the food web. Some associations between species and trophic levels are stronger than others. This strength of association is often visually depicted by the thickness of the line connecting network “nodes” (e.g., species) together—that is, the stronger the association, the thicker the line, while weaker associations are expressed through thinner lines. Like a spider’s web, then, the food web too is made of connections of various thicknesses. With that said, however, we must not ignore the metaphor’s limitations. The complexity of its nonlinguistic correlate can never be fully expressed in a few words. The complexity of its nonlinguistic correlate can never be fully expressed in a few words. The question then becomes not only one of how is a food web similar to a web, but also how is it similar to other web-like phenomena? For example, given their sharing of a metaphor, how does the web-like entity of the World Wide Web match up, structurally speaking, to the food web? When employing metaphors, then, we must carefully weigh simplicity and the efficient conveyance of otherwise complex principles against that very loss of complexity and nuance. Thus, while the food web metaphor helps to convey something that in reality is quite complex, it does so at the expense of detail and at the risk of conflating it with other “web” metaphors.

#### **3.2 Gaia Metaphor**

James Lovelock, originator of Gaia theory, makes frequent use of this metaphor, for example: ‘I often think of Gaia as if she was an old lady of about my age ... she has already lived nearly 88% of her life’ (Lovelock 2004: 96). The metaphor “nature is mother” can be traced back to the creation legend.

By personifying the earth, the Gaia metaphor powerfully represents the intrinsic value and interests of nature as a whole are worthy of human consideration encouraging a sense of reverence for life. Gaia is composed of the biosphere together with the nonliving components that shape, respond to, and cycle through the biota of the Earth, so human beings is part of a living system of which all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated. This

encourages us to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

While personification of nature has generally been accepted, the Gaia metaphor is argued to be anthropocentric for narrow utilitarian goal of supporting human lives though there are analysts who are more positive. Romaine (1996: 183) considers the Gaia metaphor to be “an anthropocentric view because it puts humans at the center of things.” Lovelock (2004: 109) describes ‘the natural ecosystems of the earth are not just there for us to take as farmland; they are there to sustain the climate and chemistry of the planet’. The specific gendering of nature as female has proved more controversial because of parallels between the oppression of women by men and the oppression of the earth by humans. Berman (2001: 267) writes:

The association of women and femininity with Nature in environmental discourse perpetuates patriarchal traditions and domination. It can therefore be seen that uncritical gendering of Nature and the use of the rape metaphor re-creates the dominant ideology of oppression.

While the rub lies in how we utilize and treat those metaphorical representations and the underlying normative assumptions that are frequently attached to them.

#### **4. The Cultural Diversity of Metaphors in Representing Nature**

As Lakoff and Johnson put it, “our conceptual system” in the individual’s “perceptual and motor systems” (1980: 555), it is necessary to summarize the changes that the Earth’s natural systems are undergoing. A word they do not mention is “ecology”. This omission leads to their failure to acknowledge that today the ecological crises should frame any discussion of metaphorical thinking. The word culture occasionally appears in their joint writings on how language is framed by embodied experience, but its complex nature and diversity is not explored in any depth. The reason why they share this oversight with key Western philosophers is ignored and how the environments of the past era were being degraded is remained unexplained. Supposedly, the individual whose sensorimotor experiences and habituated neural connections become the basis for framing the meaning of words (metaphors), and thus for how relationships are understood, is unaffected by the global changes in the natural environment. This is not simply an oversight which has few if any serious implications. It becomes of paramount importance when it is recognized that the extrapolation of the word “ecology”, which is the modernized version of the early Greek word “oikos”, always situates the individual as a participant within a cultural and environmental context. It is only when the “individual” is treated as an abstraction that these ecological relationships are ignored.

In effect, the individual’s embodied participation in this larger ecology of relationships includes other people, the semiotic systems of the culturally constructed world, and the complex message exchanges that sustain the complex and interdependent living systems we refer to as the natural environment.

Words as metaphors have a history and carry forward the misconceptions and silences of earlier thinkers who succeeded in establishing the analogs that framed the meaning of words over time. We need to change the metaphorical language that gave conceptual direction and moral legitimacy to the industrial/consumer-oriented culture that has become a major contributor to overshooting the sustaining capacity of natural systems.

#### **5. An Ecolinguistics Perspective on Metaphors in Representing Nature**

From an ecolinguistics perspective, what is most important is whether metaphors are destructive, ambivalent or beneficial from the perspective of the ecosophy (Stibbe, 2015:67), whether metaphors celebrate the lives of the myriad beings who live within, and are part of, nature or just as components. For instance, there are some regularly evoked normatively laden metaphors may be valid reasons for ranking one species above another for the ecosystem services they provide. Take metaphors like “alien” and “invasive” species. Here, one person’s Darwinian success story is another’s pest. Thus, rather than marvel at the resiliency of, say, purple loosestrife or Canada thistle

to reproduce and flourish in almost every habitat, these plants are castigated for possession of those very traits. There is nothing, however, inherently objectionable to species X living in habitat Y. Likewise, simply because species X was not “there first” need not ethically preclude it from locating in another habitat. Indeed, all “natives” sprung from aggressive “alien,” “invasive” species, otherwise they would not be here (and, of course, that includes humans). This is not to suggest that such species do not create problems. This problematic status, however, is a product of cultural values-not because of anything inherently nefarious about the species in question (divergent values, for example, in part explain why “weeds” for one farmer are “wildflowers” for another). Yet these underlying assumptions are often cut off from debate when metaphors like “alien” and “invasive” species are evoked, for they assume a natural hierarchy to the world (which prescribes differing levels of worth to species depending on where they lie on that hierarchy).

Raymond et al. (2013: 537) take a more measured approach, stating that it is necessary to ‘systematically consider the merits of different metaphors during environmental decision making’. Certainly, it would be simplistic to say that a particular metaphor is destructive in all situations, since the context of use is important. Raymond et al. (2013: 542) therefore recommend considering ‘multiple metaphors to understand human-environment relationships and adopt an appropriate metaphor to suit the...context’. In addition to how destructive, ambivalent or beneficial metaphors are, there is also the question of how active the metaphor is-if it is a dead metaphor it is unlikely to have much impact, whereas if it conveys a vivid image in the minds of hearers it could have far greater influence. Between “dead” and “vivid”, however, are metaphors which are ‘sleeping’, or ‘embedded’. Although these metaphors often go unnoticed they can be of great importance if they are pervasive metaphors that are standardly used to think about areas of life-the “metaphors we live by” (Stibbe, 2015:75).

There may likewise be sound “scientific” terms like “restoration”, “ecosystem integrity”, “ecosystem recovery”, “ecosystem health”, “forest health”, “ecosystem traps” and “key habitats” imply a natural state of things and rationale for restoring a particular ecosystem state to its earlier glory-perhaps it provides habitat for an endangered species. But those reasons are themselves the effect of value statements, grounded in beliefs about what we think nature should look like. Even the term “climate change” is not free from of normative associations. Granted, the term has a nondiscursive correlate, namely, changing atmospheric temperatures. Yet it also goes beyond this. Climates change-that is what they do (due, in part, to sunspot cycles, Milankovitch cycles, the “global conveyor belt,” etc.). To speak of “climate change,” however, is not to speak of these natural phenomena. Specifically, climate change, as often referred to in scientific, peer-reviewed journals, speaks to those changes that result from human activity. Consequently, it implies that humans should not be part of nature, and that there is a natural state of things-in terms of, for instance, atmospheric temperatures, sea levels, ecological zones, etc. Metaphorical terms act like “terministic screens”: While highlighting some parts of reality they also (often unwittingly) mask others. We should thus be more reflexive regarding our use of concepts and terms, and work to continually improve on them when possible, investigating nature metaphors with a more detailed study of their use both generally in society and in specific contexts.

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