

Military Metaphors: Inappropriate Lessons from the Language of Violence

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ABSTRACT

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Metaphors are abundant in the English language, and their use both enriches and adds depth of meaning to prose and poetry. However, when practitioners in business, economics, healthcare, and other fields use military metaphors, they risk conveying lessons and inciting actions that may be confusing, harmful, and even illegal. References to wars and their strategies, tactics, battles, and weapons raise images of violence which, while appropriate to wars and one's enemies, are inappropriate outside of the military context. This study explores the underlying philological, psychological, and philosophical principles on which metaphors are based and searches for alternatives to the language of violence. The study finds a consensus in the literature regarding the value of metaphor in conveying messages while raising questions about the efficacy, the efficiency, and the morality of using military metaphors, the language of violence, to characterize non-military situations, including business, economics, healthcare, public policy, and education. Metaphors range from the poetic to the mundane, but they have in common varying degrees of evocative power to move from abstract thought to concrete action. We conclude that such power must be constrained so as to avoid confusion, misunderstanding, and actions that have the potential for damage to organizations and individuals.

Keywords:

military, metaphor, English language, violence, weapons

“Language shapes thought” (Boroditsky, 2001). “Stick to your guns” (Mötley Crüe, 1981). “Humans are information processors” (McLeod, 2015). Words have meanings, and utterances of those words have consequences. This article is based on the author's personal experience in the military, including service in three combat divisions of the United States Army, and fifteen years in business, in large, medium, and small enterprises. Words used in a military context have been honed and sharpened to have meanings that are appropriate to wars and battles. It is the language of violence. We contend here that those words may be inappropriate, even dangerous, when applied to business, healthcare, and other situations, with the potential for doing harm to organizations and to those who work in them as well as to others.

A combat unit may have a “search and destroy” mission. Weapons of death and destruction are used to find, fix, and annihilate the enemy. Those in non-military organizations, such as businesses, health care services, and

the criminal justice system, who have the “search and destroy” mentality set themselves up for inappropriate behavior at a minimum, and harm to individuals, including criminal charges.

INTRODUCTION

This study was undertaken to determine the extent and influence of military metaphors in non-military environments. The principal research question derives from that purpose: How do military metaphors impact the thinking and consequent actions taken by those in fields such as business, economics, health care, and other non-military organizations. We introduce the investigation by using the structure of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, formally, the “Taxonomy of Educational Objectives” (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 215). The premise, tested during the study, is that the language we use builds from a base of sensory perception, i.e., at the lowest level of thinking, to how we understand what we see and hear, to applying what we think we know to the problems we face.

METAPHOR DEFINED

To “define” is at the base of the Bloom's Taxonomy pyramid (Krathwohl, 2002). It is foundational thinking, necessary but insufficient for understanding and applying the concept, much less engaging the critical thinking tasks, viz., analyzing,

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evaluating, and creating. It is to higher level thinking as sand, cement, and aggregate are to building a house. That said, we turn to defining the term, “metaphor.”

The word “metaphor” may be defined as “a common figure of speech that makes a comparison by directly relating one thing to another unrelated thing (though these things may share some similarities)” (Literary Terms, 2021). Alternatively, a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money)” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). To define the term “metaphor,” then, is to relate to such verbs as list, memorize, repeat, and state, all at the foundational level of remembering.

METAPHOR UNDERSTOOD

To understand “metaphor” is to be able to explain the meaning of the concept or idea of what a metaphor is and what it does to our thinking. When we try to understand the meaning of “metaphor,” we connect it to other terms by classifying, describing, and translating in terms that communicate what we mean when we use the term.

METAPHOR APPLIED IN CONTEXT

Given that we can define the term and understand its meaning, we can then approach the challenge of applying metaphor in some meaningful context. In this paper, we examine the implications of applying military metaphors, the language of violence, to nonmilitary spheres, such as business, economics, health care, and other fields. When we apply to such situations a metaphor that derives from and is appropriate to warfare and battles, we risk not only misunderstanding but, to the extent that words have the potential for action, injury. Words have meaning.

METAPHOR ANALYZED

What do the words mean when they are embedded in a metaphor? To begin to answer that question, we engage in a process of analysis. We organize our thoughts about the words, we compare and contrast, and we question our assumptions. We test our conclusions in the objective world of reality.

METAPHOR EVALUATED

When we evaluate the application of a military metaphor to a non-military situation, we justify its use, either implicitly or explicitly. What meaning does the military metaphor convey when it is used in a non-military context, and what is the impact of that meaning? Do metaphors matter? Based on five experiments, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) think they do: “Far from being mere rhetorical flourishes, metaphors have profound influences on how we conceptualize and act with respect to important societal issues” (p. 1). And their experiments show that the power of the metaphor is “covert” (p. 3).

Is the metaphor susceptible to different interpretations? Might one or more hearers of the words take actions that are inappropriate to a non-military situation? Based on her experiments in spatial metaphors, Boroditsky (2001) concludes that “Language can be a powerful tool for shaping abstract thought” (p. 20). Her findings provide evidence for the affirmative in answering her research question, “Does the language you speak affect how you think about the world?” (p. 1).

METAPHOR CREATED

Writers can create the most sublime metaphors, as William Wordsworth does with “A host, of golden daffodils;/Beside the lake, beneath the trees,/Fluttering and dancing in the breeze” (2021). Or consider Maxwell Anderson’s poignant *September Song*, “Oh, it’s a long long while/From May to December/But the days grow short/When you reach September” (Zollo, 2021).

METHODS

The study was done in the post-Soviet nation of Georgia using available books but mostly academic journals and relevant resources available on JSTOR and other electronic databases. An extensive literature search gave rise to alternative methods for examining the effects of using military metaphors in non-military contexts. The basic method was to review the published literature to determine the extent of interest in the nexus of language and context. We found that Bloom’s Taxonomy offers promising perspectives (Krathwohl, 2002).

RESULTS

In the present study we examined the literature of metaphor and the applications of military metaphors in non-military contexts, as well as problems with metaphors in general. We conclude that the military metaphor, a subset of what Ferrari (2007) calls “war language,” is generally found to be inappropriate when describing and analyzing non-military situations with consequences ranging from misunderstanding to distortion to disaster. We summarize our findings here starting with the current theory of metaphor as it is found in the literature. We then show how the military metaphor impinges on the thought and behavior of various non-military enterprises and conclude with a general summary of problems associated with the military metaphor.

METAPHOR THEORY

There is no shortage in the literature of definitions and analyses of metaphor. There is also considerable commentary on what Chilton (1987) calls “the militarization of language” (p. 7). He asks “what role metaphors play in social (and ultimately political) interaction, with what people and institutions are doing to and with one another when they use metaphors” (p. 11). Chilton holds that, “to use metaphor at all is a choice...over literal description” (p. 12).

BUSINESS

In an attempt to draw lessons for executives from military disasters, and making no apology, Bower (1990) perpetuates the use of the military metaphor in business. To his credit, however, he does acknowledge, however briefly, “Business failures cannot compare with the horrors of war” (p. 54). In consequence, Raupp (1991) takes issue with Bower, and more recently, Cespedes (2014) also disagrees with Bower and implores business leaders to “Stop using battle metaphors in your company strategy.” He notes that “business, unlike a war or battle, is not primarily about defeating an enemy. Business is primarily about customer value...[and] You don’t learn much about that from studying Caesar, Napoleon, Sun Tzu, or whoever your favorite general is.”

The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, the Clayton Act of 1914, and the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914 reflect a national antipathy regarding behavior by businesses attempting to restrict competition (DOJ 2021a and b). Violators face fines up to \$50,000 and imprisonment up to one year, for each offense (Watkins, 1961, p. 97). In a landmark 1960 case, “a federal grand jury sitting in Philadelphia returned twenty-one indictments...charging conspiracy to fix prices, to ‘rig’ bids, and to suppress competition among various groups of electrical equipment manufacturers in violation of the Sherman Act prohibition of all such schemes ‘in restraint of trade,’ resulting in fines totaling \$1,172,000 and seven business executives going to jail” (Watkins, 1961, p. 97).

In private meetings of companies, executives who use military language to “destroy” their competitors expose themselves to charges of violation of Section 2 of the Sherman Act, which “outlaws all contracts, combinations, and conspiracies that unreasonably restrain interstate and foreign trade...Individual violators can be fined up to \$1 million and sentenced to up to 10 years in Federal prison for each offense, and corporations can be fined up to \$100 million for each offense” (DOJ 2021a, p. 2).

ECONOMICS

Hall (2016), in referring to the 2006 Euro crisis, writes with typically academic objectivity, “For decades, the European Union has been a vehicle for peace and prosperity in Europe but it is in trouble today” (p. 1). Arrese and Vara-Miguel (2016), however, report that the media in six European countries employed a variety of metaphors to describe the same reality (p. 135). They identify “certain general categories” of metaphors “that emerge as dominant”; “wars and clashes” are one of these categories (p. 136, p. 141). In a distribution of conceptual metaphors by country (Table 5, p. 143), the authors found 181 incidences of the war metaphor to describe the Euro situation. Such phrases are evident from the media such as “battle to save the Euro,” “victory over... European partners,” “unlimited financial firepower” (p. 148), and specifically, in The Netherlands, “war metaphors were significantly more important than the rest” (p. 149).

Charteris-Black & Musolff (2003) analyze the “COMBAT metaphor” used by the media “in the reporting of the euro in the English and German financial press during a period of turbulent financial trading” and “English reporting also employs many *combat* metaphors in which the euro is an active agent” (p. 1). They conclude that, “it can definitely be stated that the EURO TRADING IS COMBAT metaphor is a main characteristic feature of British reporting on the euro” (p. 21).

HEALTHCARE

Drăgușin (2014) asserts that the military metaphor “is ubiquitous in our society (e.g., the *wars* on poverty, drugs, illiteracy, and smoking,” employing terms in discussions about disease and health such as *campaign*, *target*, *weapon*, *battle*, *fight*, *crusade*, *combat*, *struggle*, etc. “...cancer is the enemy, the physician is the commander, the patient is the combatant, and the healthcare team is the ally healed with formidable weaponry, including chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons” (p. 1229).

In the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic, we find numerous military metaphors, so many that Bates (2020) concludes “with a call to reject WAR as a metaphor for understanding SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 and, instead, encourage adopting alternative metaphors to shape public understanding” (p. 1).

Cox (2020) goes so far as to object to the term “hero” as it is used to describe the work of healthcare workers dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that “Heroism typically involves a voluntary engagement with an acknowledged degree of personal risk to help others” (p. 510). During the pandemic, healthcare workers have been doing what they always do, i.e., taking care of patients. Our gratitude for their work often goes unexpressed, but the pandemic has made what they do more immediate, enough so to invoke the military metaphor. While this is understandable, its use tends to diminish the importance of the work done every day by healthcare workers before and after the-pandemic.

PUBLIC POLICY

McGirr (2015) offers a perspective on Prohibition, the “war on alcohol,” now recognized as the “noble experiment” that spawned the greatest proliferation of organized crime in American history, a mistake that would be repeated later in the century with drugs, and both of which used the military metaphor to disastrous consequences.

Dallek (2010) cautions policymakers, including heads of government, to avoid what he calls “the tyranny of metaphor,” warning that what we are told in metaphorical language determines to a large degree what we think, which in turn leads to actions and support of actions that turn out to be disastrous.

Lyndon Johnson, in 1964, recently inaugurated and soon to be embroiled in a real shooting war in Vietnam,

declared the “war on poverty” (Cooley, 2020), and his successor Richard Nixon in 1971 declared his own “war on drugs” (Davenport, 2011), while Donald Trump in 2020 “positioned himself as a wartime president and declared a war on SARS-CoV-2” (Bates, 2020, p. 1)

Robin Lakoff (1990) provides a base for understanding how metaphors, and language generally, shape the contours of public policy:

Language is politics, politics assigns power, power governs how people talk and how they are understood. The analysis of language from this point of view is more than an academic exercise: today, more than ever, it is a survival skill (p. 7).

EDUCATION

The education system is not immune from the military metaphor. Dorn and Johanningmeier cite William James’s caution to school teachers “that the mind of their ‘enemy, the pupil’ worked against them just ‘as keenly and eagerly’ as did the mind of one’s opponent in war” (p. 197). In 1896, “John Dewey compared teachers to soldiers:...There must be some schools whose main purpose is to train the rank and file of teachers—schools whose function is to supply the great army of teachers with the weapons of their calling and direct them as to their use” (p. 197).

Other 19th century educators “similarly portrayed teachers as part of an army, fighting in turn for nationalism, social order, republicanism, and equal opportunity...The guardians of the schools frequently viewed them as large organizations the personnel of which—students and teachers—they imagined as soldiers, enemies, or factory workers” (p. 198).”

PROBLEMS WITH METAPHORS

Downie (2019, p. 1) describes “two fundamental problems with metaphors”: (1) “Every metaphor hides as much as it reveals.” There is no denying this assertion. By definition, the metaphor is not objectively true, so there are many meanings hiding under its cloak. (2) “...there is always a danger that metaphors move from being descriptive tools to becoming markers of loyalty to an entire school of thought.” The military metaphor is an example of this shift. One uses the military metaphor as a means of expression, but then the metaphor takes on a life of its own, enticing the hearer to believe the metaphor is a statement of truth. “But the truth is that metaphors are more like impressionist paintings” (p. 2), best appreciated from a distance.

Deeply problematical with the military metaphor is its clear masculine bias, marginalizing and eliminating the role of women in certain fields of interest such as medical diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. Drăgușin (2014) hypothesizes that “written medical discourse is characterized by coherent metaphor clusters centering on WAR metaphor, which masculinizes this discourse” (p. 1224). Fleischman (2008) agrees: “...to the extent that war is still a largely male

enterprise [the WAR] metaphor subtly reinforces [the social domain’s] traditional gender bias” (p. 485).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that whether in business, health care, or any other non-military specialty, one courts unseen negative outcomes by using the military metaphor. At a minimum, such outcomes may be confusion and misunderstanding, but practitioners risk damage to their organizations, as well as personal harm when they allow themselves to think—and be persuaded to action—based on the language of violence.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I hereby declare that I have no pecuniary or other personal interest, direct or indirect, in any matter that raises or may raise a conflict with my duties as a professor at Gori State Teaching University or as Director of the University’s Center for Foreign Languages or in any other capacity.

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APPENDIX

Definitions

- artillery. very large guns that are moved on wheels or metal tracks, or the part of the army that uses these.
- battle. a fight between armed forces.
- bomb. a weapon that explodes and is used to kill or hurt people or to damage buildings.
- bullet. a small, metal object that is shot from a gun.
- campaign. a group of connected actions or movements that forms part of a war.
- casualty. a person injured or killed in a serious accident or war.
- friendly fire. during a war, shooting that is hitting you from your own side, not from the enemy.
- gun. a weapon that bullets or shells (= explosive containers) are fired from.
- kill. to cause someone or something to die.
- language. a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar.
- metaphor. an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object.
- military. relating to or belonging to the armed forces.
- simile. an expression comparing one thing with another, always including the words "as" or "like."
- violence. extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage.
- war. armed fighting between two or more countries or groups, or a particular example of such fighting.
- wounded. injured, especially with a cut or hole in the skin.

Cambridge Dictionary (2021)