Metaphor

1. Definition

Metaphor is the transfer of meaning from a word's usual context to a new one. Typically, a metaphor takes the form of a comparison without explicitly saying "x is similar to y". The transfer of meaning from one domain to another is not entirely random, but nevertheless provides a sense of the unexpected: it tends to happen according to an internal logic, for example when a pig is used to denote someone with bad eating habits; or a can of sardines to denote cramped living quarters.

2. Example

In the New York City comprehensive waterfront plan *Vision 2020*, the idea of a new engagement with the water and the waterfront, after decades of neglect, is crystallized in a compelling metaphor: that of the New York water as a "Sixth Borough." It is a conceptualization introduced in the preface by the Commissioner, Amanda Burden:

> Our water is the connective tissue between our boroughs and is, in effect, our Sixth Borough.[32]

The metaphor was used repeatedly in various presentations of the plan and was quickly picked up by the media. The idea of a "Sixth Borough" is relatively well-known among inhabitants of New York City. It posits the existence of an imagined sixth community or locality in addition to the five established boroughs. Examples of this usage

include references to New Yorkers' holiday or retirement community in Florida, or the commuters from New Jersey who work in New York, or the prison population on Rikers Island as imagined "sixth boroughs." By giving New York's waterscape the name of "Sixth Borough," *Vision 2020* and the media coverage of the plan use metaphor to enable New Yorkers to see their water in a new light.

3. Explanation

Metaphors are crucial rhetorical strategies that have been studied and consciously applied at least since early antiquity. Metaphors are also crucial ways for structuring our knowledge about our position in the world. Ideas like "life as a road", or "up" and "down" as shorthand for "good" or "bad", are effectively "metaphors we live by".[33] In that sense, metaphors are akin to scripts: they are a structural narrative form that informs how we see the world and that defines our possibilities to speak of our future selves.

Stories in planning and policy texts tend to be constructed around "generative metaphors" that link "casual accounts of policy problems to particular proposals for action" and that connect "accounts of 'is' and 'ought'".[34] Some of the most powerful metaphors to imagine urban relationships, such as that of the city as body, or the more recent metaphor of city as "resilient" or "smart" draw on imagined analogies with the human body or the natural world. What such metaphors do is posit, in condensed form, a city problem and its solution in a way that suggests compelling causal relationships. If the city is said to be "congested", the logical solution that presents itself is new infrastructure for better circulation. Metaphors in planning are not external to the material city; rather, they are central to how problems and their solutions are imagined and formulated, and to how cities' material morphology is framed and shaped.

Fig. 6: Copenhagen Finger Plan (1974)

Perhaps most important, metaphors are drawn upon when a factual, down-to-earth term is missing, when both author(s) and reader(s) are called upon to take a flight of imagination in order to make sense of what is being described. Metaphors are the language of uncertainty, and coincide with the coining of new meanings. Metaphors also matter in terms of playfulness of a text: they are about keeping the reader interested and invested in a story well-told. A metaphor such as that of the Sixth Borough is not only persuasive in evoking causalities, but also functions by organizing the sympathies of the reader towards particular perspectives within the narrative. In the example from *Vision 2020*, the metaphor of the Sixth Borough invites New Yorkers to align their own popular

knowledge of the city with the view of the policy document. It is important to note that particular metaphors in planning can become so common that citizens and planners alike develop a blind spot to the fact that they are metaphors, in other words, that they are imaginative formulations rather than accurate descriptions of the real world. An example in everyday speech is that of the four "legs" of a table. In planning, an example could be the post-war "finger plan" of Copenhagen (see fig. 6), a plan envisioning development of the Danish capital along five finger-like corridors, which has remained remarkably influential.[35]

4. Applications

Metaphors are powerful rhetorical strategies to situate a plan and a development area as part of recognizable plots. Often, metaphors can be used to legitimize particular courses of action by suggesting a natural or causal relationship by comparison with the natural world or the popular imagination. If a coastal city is described as "under threat" or "under siege" of rising waters, the construction of massive sea walls would seem a logical reaction to the militarization of relationships with the environment. A metaphor such as the "Sixth Borough" gestures towards softer approaches of cohabitation between the city and the water.

Used clumsily or when unconvincing, imaginative metaphors can draw ridicule. Complex or unusual metaphors can also alienate or confuse readers. For planners aiming to draw on the strengths of metaphor in communicating complex problems and their possible solutions, several things are important to bear in mind: 1. At the very least, metaphor is about playfulness and harnessing the imaginative possibilities of language in communicative situations. Using metaphors may catch the readers' imagination and can be an effective way to communicate key points in a memorable way. But ill-advised or unconvincing metaphors in planning will be just as memorable, and may become a rallying point for opposition. 2. Established metaphors are most recognisable and will resonate most easily with the broad population. But they may feel generic and

may come with a complex baggage of associated and often suspect meanings – the city as body is one example. 3. Metaphors from local or historical contexts may have the best chance to resonate with local communities. A survey of local narrative features may help to identify metaphors relevant to local communities or stakeholders. As always, narrative used unconvincingly, out of context or in self-contradictory ways runs the risk of backfiring.

Related entries: Emplotment, Genre, Scripts

Further Reading

Ameel, Lieven. "Metaphorizations of the Waterfront in New York City's Comprehensive Waterfront Development Plan *Vision 2020* and Foer's 'The Sixth Borough.'" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 3 (2019): 251–62.

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Donoghue, Denis. *Metaphor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Pakarinen, Terttu. *Metaphors in Urban Planning: From Garden City to Zwischenstadt and Netzstadt*. Tampere: Tampere University of Technology, 2010.