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L Michael Hall, Ph.D.

The Surprising Meta-Level of Metaphors

In language analysis, metaphors have typically not received a great deal of attention or even good press. Many grammarians and linguists of the past have passed right over them as “just a figurative way of talking.” They believed they did not contribute much to understanding or working effectively in a language medium. It used to be that way, but “the times, they are a changin’.”

In Lakoff and Johnson’s work, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which may very well become a classic, as well as in the new fields of Cognitive Linguistics (Langacker), metaphor has finally had a chance to take the stage, front and center.

For NLPers, this offers no surprise at all. After all, we operate from the realization that language itself functions as a map of the territory, and is therefore *not real*. It is not the territory (Korzybski). All words and sentences can therefore only stand for something else. This means that language operates referentially. It refers to something other than itself. In short, all language operates metaphorically. And this applies to the languages of all systems (music, mathematics, etc.) which serve as *symbols* for some referent.

So what’s a meta-phor?

A metaphor describes a symbol that stands for something else. And we use it in order to mentally and conceptually map things not present.

Take a look at the word “metaphor” itself. From the Greek word, *meta-pherein*, it literally refers to bearing (carrying) something over to something else. Hence, I may speak of communication as verbal conflict. “He put forward some powerful arguments, but I was able to shoot them down.” “She wouldn’t let up, but kept coming at me, relentlessly demanding that I explain where I was.” Or I may speak about communication as a dance. “Our conversation felt easy and effortless as we moved with each other in a rhythm that made us feel validated and