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From metaphoric litany text to scenarios—How to use metaphors in futures studies

Osmo Kuusi^{a,*}, Outi Lauhakangas^b, Ruuta Ruttas-Küttim^c

^aFinland Futures Research Centre of University of Turku, Finland

^bInternational Association of Paremiology, Finland

^cCentre for Development of Public Administration, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

Metaphor and metonymy belong to the key concepts of semiotics and general linguistics. As illustrations of scenarios, metaphors already have a long history in the futures studies, too. Metaphors were discussed in the *CLA Reader 1.0*¹ (Inayatullah ed., 2004) but the *CLA Reader 2.0* edited by Inayatullah and Milojevic (2015) gives metaphors the central role in futures research² that they deserve. The article compares the approaches of semiotics and the CLA and suggests practical steps for the analysis of metaphoric futures oriented texts and their use in the construction of scenarios. Assuming that the litany is a text, metaphors may be present on all levels of the CLA: litany, systemic causes, worldview and myth/emotion. Metaphors are suitable even for the illustration of the CLA second level quantitative causal relations between variables. As an illustrating case study, we analyze a text that suggests the great future of the Northern Sea Route. The deconstruction of the litany results in two narratives or scenarios. They are constructed utilizing proverbs and other metaphoric sayings that get many citations on the Internet.

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1. Use of metaphors and metonymies in futures studies

In the *Poetics*,³ Aristotle presented the classic definition of metaphor: metaphor gives a thing the name that belongs to something else. In other words, it is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. The related concept that is important in the general linguistics and in the semiotics is metonymy. The metonymical link between two entities e.g. words is based on contiguity. For example, one entity is a part of something else. The connection between the crown and the kingdom is metonymic. On the other hand, the metaphoric link is based on similarities between different domains.

Another way to define the difference between metaphors and metonyms is the following often mentioned characterization: a metaphor creates new links between otherwise distinct conceptual domains, whereas a metonymy

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: osmo.kuusi@utu.fi (O. Kuusi), outi.lauhakangas@sci.fi (O. Lauhakangas), ruuta.ruttas@hotmail.com (R. Ruttas-Küttim).

¹ We consider that the name *CLA Reader 1.0* is suitable for the book *The Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) Reader* (Inayatullah (ed.), 2004) because the title of the second Reader edited by Inayatullah is *CLA Reader 2.0*.

² Following the suggestion of Kuusi, Kerstin, and Karlheinz (2015), we use the concepts "futures studies" and "futures research" in the following way. Futures studies refers to all kinds of approaches studying the future or futures. Futures research is looking for pragmatically valid knowledge concerning possible futures.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* Chapter 21, 1457b1-30, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1974>.

relies on the existing links within them. If a scenario is illustrated with a metonymic picture, its message is defined both by what is in the picture and by what is not in the picture. For example, if a traffic scenario is illustrated with a picture of a car the message is that the role of trains is not very important in that scenario. In this article we concentrate on metaphors, because we are interested in the process, how the links between different conceptual domains are created.

As many case examples in the *CLA Reader 2.0* (Inayatullah & Milojevic, 2015) show, metaphors can be nice tools for the construction of alternative futures. However, as communication tools metaphors are more demanding than metonymic illustrations. If people have different native languages or different cultural backgrounds they have difficulties to understand metaphors of each other. For example, Volter Kilpi is a Finnish novelist whose novels are full of specific Finnish metaphors and idioms. Many consider that his novel *Alastalon salissa* (In Alastalo's Parlour,⁴ Kilpi, 2005,1933) is the best ever published Finnish novel. However, for a long time attempts to translate this novel into other languages did not succeed. Finally, a successful Swedish translation of the famous novel was published in 1997. Besides exceptional linguistic skills of the translator – he had also translated James Joyce's *Ulysses* into Swedish – the job probably succeeded because of cultural similarities between Finland and Sweden.

Even without cultural and language based difficulties, some people have difficulties to understand new or living metaphors. Typical impairments in Alzheimer's dementia are difficulties in the comprehension of non-literal language such as metaphor, sarcasm and idioms. For example, Maki, Yamaguchi, Koeda, and Yamaguchi (2013) found an early deterioration in the comprehension of sarcasm and metaphor in aged normal controls and subjects with amnesic mild cognitive impairment.

On the other hand, if people learn to understand metaphors of culturally distant people they also learn to understand them much deeper. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) have remarked, metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. On the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical. Even mathematics uses metaphors: what else than metaphors based on perceived distance are the x-axis or the y-axis? Or in physics, the examples of the magnetic field and the sound wave? In futures research, a nice example of a fossilised metaphor that is no longer considered to be the metaphor is the concept "scenario". When this concept was first used in futures research it was a metaphorical loan from the theatre/cinema world. A next important fossilised metaphor of futures research might be the "Futures Map".⁵

In the articles and in case examples of the *CLA Reader 2.0* (Inayatullah & Milojevic, 2015), metaphors have central roles. In futures research approach suggested by Inayatullah (2015), metaphors belong to its six basic pillars. After mapping, anticipating and timing the future, Inayatullah's third basic pillar is to use the CLA to articulate core metaphors and develop new strategies and measures of success.

Besides the systematic frame of the CLA, futurists have used metaphors in many kinds of practical efforts for a long time already. Metaphors or metonymies have been used in the sketching of basic ideas of scenarios as well as in the interpretation of weak signals. They are useful in social brainstorming sessions. According to Ruttas-Küttim (2007), perhaps the best connection for their use is in participatory activities where time is limited, the number of participants is quite big, and it is important to reach a common understanding. It is also possible to use them for interpreting research results. It is not important that all possible metaphors are taken into account; it is important to look at the same phenomenon in different contexts (metaphors provide them) and try to create a new one (better, if there will be more). Already for a long time in the practical work of futurists, single word metaphors that name alternative scenarios have been a much used approach (compare e.g. Spencer & Montero Salvatico, 2015). In alternative scenarios for 2025, an organization will be e.g. Castle, Swamp, Road, Hurricane or Fish.

When we consider metaphors from the point of view of the futures studies, the distinction made by the linguist Mac Cormac (1985) is useful. He distinguishes internal and external aspects of metaphor. Viewed internally, metaphors operate as cognitive processes that produce new insights and new hypotheses. Viewed externally, metaphors operate as mediators between the human mind and culture. New metaphors change both the ordinary language we use and the ways we perceive and understand the world. Taking into account both external and internal aspects, metaphors can be a very useful source for scenarios. Mac Cormac (1985) remarked that metaphors often fade or die as they become commonplace. This does not, however, happen to culturally central but controversial metaphors.

Mac Cormac's two functions are close to the distinction made by Tarasti (2000) between endosign and exosign based on the classic biosemiotic distinction by Jacob von Uexküll. Von Uexküll presented the distinction already in 1909 (von Uexküll & Geigges, 1993). Kuusi and Hiltunen (2011) have discussed how to use the endosign/exosign distinction in futures research. Like Tarasti (2000) below, we consider that this distinction is crucial when futures research wants to benefit from the findings of semiotics:

In my career as a semiotician, I have reached the conclusion that probably one of the most essential philosophical issues concerning all sign functions and activities is the following: are the signs in the reality around us and in us created by ourselves, or do they come to us from outside, as objective entities, independent of ourselves and our activities?

We consider that the integration of metaphors to the frame of futures research can benefit much from the above basic

⁴ About Kilpi and his book, <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/english/?id=4972>.

⁵ According to Kuusi et al. (2015) the Futures Map is the comprehensive description of the outcomes of a futures research process. It comprises all relevant pictures of the future identified during the process and all relations between these pictures.

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