

When you are struggling to find a solution to knotty problems, metaphors can give you some unexpected help – and not just in a metaphorical sense.

By Vera F. Birkenbihl

INVENT, if you trace it back to its Latin roots, means “**COME upon**.” How do we invent, how do we come upon the ideas, theories, or solutions to problems? Do the concepts that help us think about certain things have a decisive influence on the result? To make the point clear:

We should be more aware of the concepts in which we think. In the first place, so we won't be (so) susceptible to being tempted to come upon the wrong thing. And secondly, we can dramatically increase our chances of solving a tricky problem if we have a better (deeper) understanding of it before we start coming upon solutions and making decisions.

I would like to invite you to take part in a little language exercise involving five little tasks. After you finish it, you can “attach” my subsequent suggestions to your own results. Sound good? Then let's begin.

Mini-Quiz

Task 1: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “dismantle”?

Task 2: Some words are “simple” words (e.g., so, as, because, how, when, if, at, on, in, beside, the, that, but, however, etc.). Other words are concepts. Question: What is the



difference between a concept and a word?

Task 3: Note down a few examples of concepts!

Task 4: Some concepts are metaphors. Question: What is a metaphor?

Task 5: Write down a few examples of metaphors.

If you can't think of any, don't worry, that (unfortunately) tends to be the rule. At the end of this article you'll know more.

Discussion of the Mini-Quiz

Let's start with the difference between a concept and a metaphor. Every con-

cept has a meaning (unlike simple words, see Task 2). Examples of concepts are car, house, mountain, or metaphor. The latter concept is derived from the Greek word *metapherein*, which literally means “TO CARRY OVER,” or transfer. The question arises: what is carried over or transferred? The answer: a meaning. We take CONCEPTs, such as **leg (back, arm)** and carry them over them from the body of a person or animal to, say, **a table (leg of table), mountain (back of a mountain),** or **river (arm of a river)**. But now “arm” no longer means an actual arm (with hands and fingers). Rather, we “mean” an “arm” in a figurative sense; strictly speaking, we're talking about an offshoot of a river.



We don't expect this "arm" to grab us, just as we don't expect the leg of our dinner table to start dancing a tango.

When the **meaning** of a concept is **carried over** to something else, **this concept** (in a figurative sense) becomes a **metaphor**.

Another example: Think of the end of a day, of dusk, of twilight. Now let's carry over the concept **twilight** to life to produce the term **twilight of life**. This metaphor reveals that metaphors contain meanings that go far beyond what we "officially" think/say. We'll come back to this later.

When I was in school, we were still taught that metaphors were superfluous, flowery terms or rhetorical embellishments. Both "flowery" and "embellishments" are themselves metaphors, and they clearly show **how a concept influences thought**. When we hear/read "flowery" ("embellishment"), we think: well that's quite pleasant but not absolutely

necessary – or can you imagine a life-sustaining embellishment? Still, the fact is:

Without metaphors we wouldn't be able to think at all!

For this reason, some researchers claim that metaphors change the way we perceive things. Neil POSTMAN, for instance, refers to metaphors as **organs of perception**. (This metaphor is even more revealing than a "FLOWERY term.") Naturally, metaphors can also be considered **instruments of perception**, but in any case, POSTMAN's credo is true: "We see the world through metaphors."

If we think only of river arms, table legs, and mountain backs, this is not clear to us immediately. The metaphor twilight of life, though, implies a day leading up to it (and thus a life leading up to it). But we can easily forget that four-year-old children can die of cancer – which makes the idea of **TWILIGHT** of life absurd. With this example alone we see that a metaphor "includes" much more than simple concepts.

Now let's have a look at the other tasks listed above. The first one is what we associate with "dismantle." I would recommend that you play this language game with as many people as possible, at the same time or one after another (e.g. on the phone) – starting with "dismantle" and then moving on to other concepts. First the players should note down their initial associations, and then they should compare them. Warning: you may be in for some dramatic surprises! Because meanings that surround a concept like a field (semantic field) can be completely different for other people than they are for us. And because ultimately each person can only give a concept (including a metaphor) a meaning based on experiences they have had with the concept so far. If I asked you to write down

what you associate with “rhodopsin,” most of you wouldn’t be able to think of anything because you are not familiar with the term. Not being familiar implies an absence of meaning. Let’s try it with the word “midnight” instead, because here you’ll surely think of something. However, the first person may think of the witching hour, the second of her favorite TV program, which begins at midnight, and the third of his bed, because he normally goes to sleep at this hour. What do you think of?

As long as people tend to interpret a word in a similar way, i.e. **give** it a similar meaning, we don’t notice that we ourselves are the ones who assign meanings to words we hear or read. But it is helpful to be aware of this in case of misunderstandings. **Little language games can be extremely instructive (and not only yield big surprises)!** If pupils played word games like this one **every day**, they would develop more of a feeling for the language than they do from most of the exercises that are designed to achieve this aim. Not only in cases of misunderstandings is it helpful to understand what all concepts/metaphors can mean, but also when it’s a matter of coming upon or “inventing” new ideas, in short: when we want to be creative (we will come back to this).

For the moment, however, let’s return to your associations with **dismantle**. Naturally, you know what dismantle means to you; your associations attest to this. If you haven’t noted anything down so far, you can do so now. Because your associations are much more interesting to you after you’ve briefly thought about what “dismantle” means to you ...

Now it is fascinating to know whether you interpreted “dismantle” in a real or metaphorical way. Did you think of dismantle in the sense of actually taking something apart? **Where?** Who took what apart? And why? (You should ask your friends such questions about different concepts, too, when you play this language game.) The answers enable us to **FIND** (usually unconscious) implications behind the **concepts**. You’ll notice the following:

Part of every “idea FINDING process” depends on the meanings that we give concepts



Net of knowledge: symbolizes the CONNECT-edness of knowledge units

Particularly thrilling is the search for EXFORMATION. This term, coined by Tor NØRRETRANDERS, describes hidden meanings that we link to a concept. Exformation is information that has been let out (from “ex,” which means “out,” or “out of,” as in the word exit.) The vernacular knows the idea, speaking of information that we “read between the lines” (hear), although it isn’t actual read (written). The exformation of **twilight** of life includes life beforehand. And when something is **really** dismantled, the question arises: Does this word have **positive** or **negative connotations** for you? Is something dismantled in order to repair it and make it work? Or vice versa to stop it from working? Both are possible. Most people associate it with making something not work, which makes it difficult for them to realize that it is also possible to understand the word in the opposite way. And this is precisely what this game teaches us: first, that different people interpret the same term in **different** ways. And second, (here we see the connection to in-**nova**-tive thinking):

There are hidden components of meaning that we are not aware of which get caught in a type of thought-rut. And thought-ruts prevent **new, i.e. in-**nova**-tive thinking!**

So what we are able to think about a problem depends to a large extent on the meanings we give the concepts describing the problem. And this brings us back to the idea I promised to return to. Just as twilight of life implies for most people a life lived previously, dismantle implies for them whatever they themselves pack **into** the word.

The meanings you give the key words in the description of a problem determine the direction in which you can think!

However, if you are conscious of what’s going on linguistically, you have a chance to escape this thought rut. This is one of the two aims of this article. The second is to heighten your innovative potential!

So far, we have discussed the term dismantle in a rather literal sense. But if we think of dismantling as a metaphor, we should know:

We not only transport the concept of dismantling into the new idea, but we also take as baggage (or ballast) all the implications the concept has for us! For example, we talk about dismantling the social system. What do you think the many people who demonstrate against efforts to dismantle the social system were thinking?

I imagine they thought along the same lines as most of the participants in my seminars, who assumed that this meant destroying a healthy social system, and so they protested. But keep in mind the fact that someone was able to make the idea appealing to them because dismantle can also have positive implications (taking something apart that needs to be taken apart to be improved).

People who rabble-rouse with this metaphor refrain from mentioning that our social system has not been healthy for a long time. That the German government is frantically trying to heal a **social system** that is very ill. Germany has yet to undergo processes that the United States and other European countries went through a long time ago.

And this is precisely the power of **metaphors**: they exercise more **power** over our thinking the less consciously we differentiate between a simple concept (dismantling a machine) and a metaphor (dismantling the social system) and register it in different cases. Anyone who cannot make this differentiation (most people!) is helplessly at the mercy of demagogues (from advertising people to teachers to politicians). Therefore, we need more than just one metaphor to probe an issue, because:

Each metaphor only sheds LIGHT on **one aspect of a matter, and leaves all the **others** in the DARK.**

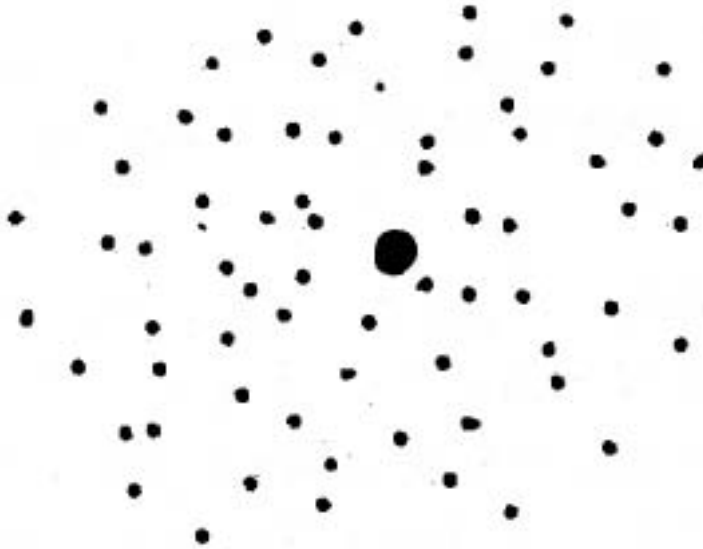
As a result, the more metaphors we find for an issue, the more different aspects we are conscious of, and the deeper our understanding is. This helps us not only leave the surface (and gets rid of the danger of superficial thought), but prevents demagogues from duping us. But the best thing is:

The more metaphors we find for a problem, the more chances there are for truly **new and **in-nova-tive** thinking.**

I would like to demonstrate this based on three metaphors relating to KNOWLEDGE (including knowledge acquisition). This is one of the main topics I think about and I have come upon more than 20 metaphors for it (I will tell you why in a moment).

1. The knowledge network symbolizes the interRELATIONSHIP of units of knowledge; this metaphor emphasizes the NETWORK but leaves all other aspects in the dark.

2. A swarm of ideas (compare a swarm of mosquitoes; each idea is a metaphorical insect) underlines the fact that every mosquito can come into contact with every other one. At the same time, however, the fact that information can also be methodically incorporated in a “network” is missing.



Mosquito swarm: each idea a metaphorical insect

If we had only the one or the other of these metaphors, in each case we would miss something very essential.

3. The cognition field. Think of children who put different-shaped objects into holes: the triangular object doesn't fit into the round hole and vice versa. In short, the new part can only “penetrate” where there is already a fitting FORM. This metaphor emphasizes:

**In-FORM-ation has to “fit”
in appropriate FORMS to
be grasped. If a fitting
FORM is lacking, it cannot
be understood!**

This metaphor stresses that someone who sends in-FORM-ation can only reach recipients who possess a fitting FORM. If a recipient does not understand it, it is not his or her “fault.”

No matter whether we call it chance, fate, or God’s will, what is important is that the learning one (e.g. a pupil) is not “at fault” if he or she does not understand something, although this is conveyed to millions of pupils every day. By the same token, a client is not “stupid” who cannot understand the explanations of an consultant – although most customers consider themselves to be “too stupid.” No wonder, after their experiences in school.

So there you have it. Three metaphors and three **different** aspects that bring us much “closer” to the subject of knowledge (and knowledge acquisition) than each metaphor could alone.

So when it comes to important issues, and in particular problems that we want to solve creatively, we should come up with as many metaphors as possible. But as metaphors aren’t simply lying by the wayside, we have to invent or discover them. This is quite simple. It is one of the Head Games[®] I have invented.

**Every concept can serve as
a metaphor for every topic –
provided that we understand it.**

If you don’t know what a dandy horse is, for example, then you can’t use it as a metaphor. But if you do know the term (a kind of early bicycle), you can develop pure associations. Even Leonardo da Vinci knew this: give a person two concepts that are completely unrelated, give him a little time, and her mind will be forced to make a connection.

When you play the Metaphor Game[®], you will have no choice but to discover and INVENT metaphors – you can’t prevent yourself from succeeding!

Each additional metaphor will DEEPen your understanding and heighten the probability of your breaking out of old thought ruts and thinking in a truly **new** and in-**nova**-tive way. Have fun ...



The Metaphor-Game[®]

Make alphabetical lists of things in general categories that are as concrete as possible (e.g., vehicles with which we can transport things or ourselves, such as balloon, car, Concorde, dandy horse, and zeppelin). Now probe each of the concepts on the list to see if they benefit you as a metaphor. With the help of this particular list, I could find a few further metaphors, e.g.:

BALLOON: Shifting one’s own standpoint higher, gaining an overview, getting a bird’s eye perspective – often the information we are supposed to understand is too close (we get lost in details) ...

BICYCLE: The more well-trained we are, the easier it is for us to ride a bike or absorb new information (learn). On the other hand, high-quality gears make our work easier, especially going uphill (i.e. when things get particularly difficult). A good mental technique (like the Metaphor Game[®]) can facilitate thinking processes in a similar way (especially when they are difficult). We actually have two metaphors here: bicycle (underlines the necessity of training) and switching gears (one can facilitate particularly difficult things, like riding up hills).

Note: underlining, italics, capitalization and illustrations correspond to the thought and presentation process used in Birkenbihl seminars. For more information refer to: www.birkenbihl-insider.de