Metaphorical Stories in Discourse

When Hillary Clinton conceded in 2008 that she did not quite "shatter the glass ceiling," and when Rick Perry in 2012 called Mitt Romney a "vulture capitalist," they used abbreviated *metaphorical stories*, in which stories about one topic are presented as stories about something entirely different. This book examines a wide range of metaphorical stories, beginning with literary genres such as allegories and fables and then focusing on metaphorical stories in ordinary conversations, political speeches, editorial cartoons, and other communication. Sometimes metaphorical stories are developed in rich detail; in other examples, like "vulture capitalist," they may merely be referenced or implied. This book argues that close attention to metaphorical stories and story metaphors enriches our understanding and is essential to any theory of communication. The book introduces a theoretical structure, which is developed into a theory of metaphorical stories, and then illustrates the theory by applying it to actual discourse.

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Preface

The cover image, from a 16th-century painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder titled "The Blind Leading the Blind," depicts a line of blind men connected by their staffs or by a hand on the shoulder of the man in front. All are in poses suggesting forward motion. The title phrase is a familiar aphorism, often used as a metaphorical description of a situation in which a person who is giving advice knows no more than those who are receiving the advice, or in which a leader of a group is no better informed than any other member of the group. "*Blind*" implies "*unable to see*." "*To see*" is more generally used as a metaphor for "to know," and "*leading*" is generally used as a metaphor for both "governing" and "advising," so as used in this aphorism, "*blind*" implies something like "the ignorant giving advice to the ignorant." TO SEE IS TO KNOW is an example of what is often called a *conceptual metaphor*, in which a general class of abstract ideas (KNOWING or UNDERSTANDING) is understood and experienced in terms of objects or activities in the here-and-now physical world (EYESIGHT). The aphorism "*blind leading the blind*" expresses this common conceptual metaphor in a blend with another common conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY and with the *irony* implied by describing a seemingly contradictory idea (how can a blind person lead anyone else? How can a person who has no knowledge of a topic provide advice to anyone else?) The painting itself is an example of a particular kind of visual metaphor, inasmuch as it illustrates a common metaphorical aphorism (the title of the painting). The topic of the aphorism is not included in this image; it is left to the viewer to apply the metaphor.

The painting does not stop at depicting the metaphorical situation, a row of blind men following other blind men. It also illustrates a *metaphorical story*: The blind man at the front of the procession has fallen, apparently because he stumbled on a rock shown in the path next to him. The man behind is stumbling, off balance, and evidently about to fall over the fallen man, leading to the expectation that the four men following the second will also stumble and fall. The story: A group of blind men is led by another blind man who cannot see where he is going and consequently stumbles over an obstacle in the path, as a result of which all of the men will end up falling.

Understanding this painting involves some mental activities that are likely to be totally automatic; a typical viewer is unlikely to be aware of them at all. The underlying conceptual metaphor must become activated – or rather, the aspects of the conceptual metaphor that are relevant to the painting must be *partially* activated and connected with the images. The title of the painting helps by cuing the familiar aphorism. The title may also cue one or more situations in which the viewer has read or heard this aphorism in connection with a particular topic; if so, those situations are also likely to be recalled, and connected with the painting.

I first became interested in metaphorical stories when, as part of a workshop on metaphor analysis organized by Lynne Cameron at the University of Leeds, I participated in a line-by-line analysis of a speech by Tony Blair, then British prime minister and leader of the Labour Party. In this speech, Blair developed a story about a marital dispute that involves the wife throwing dishes ("crockery"), a commonplace in TV situation comedies and newspaper comic strips, as a metaphor for his own dispute with a discontented segment of the Labour Party. As I studied that speech, I also noticed a number of phrases that implied metaphorical stories but did not spell them out (e.g. the Conservative Party as a burglar, trying to enter government "*through the back door*"). As I analyzed other texts, including several conversations about relations between police and community, I encountered other metaphorical stories and other short phrases that allude to or imply metaphorical stories. Some, like Blair's "*throwing crockery*" story, drew on popular culture. Others drew on or developed conceptual metaphors in quite original and creative ways.

These early experiences led to this book, and many of the examples used in this book are drawn from those early studies. Initially I attended primarily to casual, nonliterary metaphorical stories; only as I began to prepare this book did I broaden the scope to include the literary genres such as allegories and parables that have been the focus of most previous research on this topic. Even then, I have retained a primary focus on metaphorical stories that are related or alluded to in "ordinary" (nonliterary) discourse. I quickly discovered that political discourse, including news coverage and editorial cartoons as well as ordinary conversations about political topics, is a rich source of entertaining and often witty metaphorical stories. As a consequence, many of the examples in this book are drawn from political discourse including speeches, editorials, and editorial cartoons.

An inevitable consequence of drawing examples from contemporary history is that the context of the examples continually changes as history continues to move and develop. As the context of a metaphorical story changes, the understanding of it must also change – and the context of political discourse can change quite rapidly. One example of this interaction between history and language / language analysis appears in Chapter 1, much of which is devoted

to analysis of a passage from Hillary Clinton's concession speech during the 2008 U.S. Democratic Presidential Primary. Even as I wrote the analysis of the "*glass ceiling*" passage, I was fully aware that she intended to campaign for president again, and that she would likely succeed at least in becoming the Democratic candidate. As I write this preface, and complete the final revisions on the manuscript, she was nominated and campaigned for the highest office in the United States, won the popular vote, but lost the Electoral College vote. The meaning of that iconic metaphorical story from her 2008 speech has, unavoidably, changed to accommodate the new reality that was established on November 8, 2016.

Other examples that appear in various parts of the book involve news coverage of the European Union. Between the time I wrote these passages and the present time, when I am completing my revisions and polishing of the manuscript, the British people voted to leave the EU; by the time the book appears, negotiations for "Brexit" will be well under way. Again, the meaning of the MARRIAGE and FAMILY metaphors long used in news analysis of European politics will unavoidably change as the historic and cultural context changes.

In these and other instances in which history will have the opportunity to make some of my analysis seem obsolete or naive, I have noted the potential effects of historical changes on how the metaphors may be understood, but to attempt to keep fully abreast of a rapidly changing context would be futile. Accordingly, I can only hope that readers will approach the examples discussed throughout the book by considering the context in which the initial analyses were written.

The final version of this volume benefited greatly from the advice and suggestions of an anonymous final reviewer, as well as from the advice and suggestions of three initial reviewers. My thinking about the various topics represented in this book has been influenced and shaped by conversations with a large number of colleagues, especially Lynne Cameron, Cynthia-Lou Coleman, Alice Deignan, Elizabeth El Refaie, Ray Gibbs, Jr., Beate Hampe, Mike Hanne, Eric Jensen, Elena Negrea-Busuioc, Elena Semino, Gerard Steen, Min Zhu, and many others. I am deeply indebted to my editor, Andrew Winnard, and the production staff at Cambridge University Press for their assistance and advice throughout the writing and production process. As always, I owe more than I can express to the support, encouragement, and advice of my wife LaJean Humphries.