Developing a Metaphorical Language for the Future

Introduction

Understanding and communicating complexity calls for a new type of language. The urgency of the times suggests that there is little time to learn it. In effect people need already to have some competence in it. The proposal is that this language should be based on metaphor.

This paper briefly recalls some of the cognitive functions of metaphor in shaping perceived reality. It then goes on to consider features of language which tend to condition ways of approaching the future -- even to the point of being considered metaphoric traps. The concern is to highlight unexplored opportunities for reframing attitudes to what may emerge, whether as problems, organizations, information systems or conceptual frameworks. It is those forms of metaphor that enhance or constrain individual or collective strategies that are of prime interest.

The focus here is on issues in English. The challenges are multiplied many-fold when other languages are taken into consideration -- especially when it is assumed that translations between languages do not raise fundamental conceptual issues (1).

Cognitive function of metaphoric language

Since the 1970s there has been an explosion of interest in the role of metaphor in all areas (2), but especially in the language of disciplines (3). It is no longer considered merely a matter of rhetorical flourish or poetical imagination (4). Lakoff and Johnson (5) argue that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical. Robert Nisbett (6) states: "It is clear from many studies of the cognitive process generally, and particularly of creative thought, that the act of thought in its more intense phases is often inseparable from metaphor -- from that intuitive, iconic, encapsulating grasp of a new entity or process." E L Doctorow (7) has even argued that: "The development of civilizations is essentially a progression of metaphors". In a similar vein, Gibson Winter (8) argues that: "...if the present age faces a crisis of root metaphors, a shift in metaphors may open new vistas of human possibilities."

Metaphors are used to get a conceptual handle on complexity, notably in physics (9). They have a major role in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (10). Educators make extensive use of metaphor, building on its traditional role in religion. Elise Boulding (11) has explored its educational uses in relation to the "imaging capacity" required to build the future. Metaphor is fundamental to skilful advertising and image building, notably in politics. It underlies discussion of organizational cultures and their ability to innovate. In that respect metaphor or guiding imagery (leitbild in German) is also vital to technological development (12).

In a key paper, Donald Schon (13) argues that the essential difficulties in social policy have more to do with problem setting than with problem solving. For him: "the framing of problems often depends upon metaphors underlying the stories which generate problem setting and set the direction of problem solving." In a much cited example he contrasts a housing problem where slum areas were defined as a "blight" or "disease" with one in which they were perceived as "natural communities". Using the medical metaphor the former justifies use of radical "surgery" to excise the blight, whereas the other calls for ways of enhancing the life of those communities.

A metaphor thus provides a framework of credible associations that increases the probability that relationships in other domains will be conceived according to that pattern, rather than another. The potential of generative metaphor in relation to problem-setting and social policy has since been explored by others (14). It has been associated with the question of framing, reframing, and the frame conflict underlying controversy (15). Metaphor has major implications for knowledge representation in artificial intelligence because of its use in refining ontologies (16).

Increasing interest in the role of imagination in the creation of present and future realities relies to a high degree on the use of metaphor (17). The envisaging process may be triggered by guided fantasy or the appropriateness of a newly encountered metaphor.

Defining the future through the senses
(a) With foresight

The future is obviously a feature of our understanding of time. And yet, lacking any organs to sense the dimensions of time, we choose to understand the future by making metaphoric use of organs through which the natural environment is sensed. But even then there is a metaphoric bias (at least in Western-influenced thinking) in favour of one sense, the sense of sight (hence "foresight"), at the expense of the other senses. As Richard Slaughter (18) puts it: "It suggests a kind of vision -- a vision of the mind rather than of the organs of sight." Use of the sight metaphor in this context is part of long tradition as indicated by the term "seer".

He notes that foresight "springs, in part, from unconscious sources...it is grounded in innate human capacities and needs, but its social expressions require institutional arrangements." Little needs to be said about the extensive preoccupation with "vision" and "foresight" in the futures literature, or with the consequent concern with different "perspectives" and "views". In relation to policy-making, it is helpful to understand such uses as originating from the evident needs of either a migrating tribe or a ship.

The tribe needs a scouting patrol (an avant garde) to provide a sense of dangers and opportunities, especially in the direction in which the tribe is proposing to move. A "lookout" function may be required as in the case of the ship. However the ship metaphor draws attention to hidden dangers of reefs and shoals, and hence the need for "forecasting" to assess the depth of the waters into which the ship is moving -- "plumbing" the future has the same origin. "Extrapolation" is presumably constrained by the spatial perspective of a surveyor.

More interesting is the implication that an "image" or "vision" can be developed (or "envisaged"), as an exercise of the disciplined imagination, and projected onto a future that functions rather like a movie screen, or like a space to be decorated prior to becoming habitable. In Slaughter's terms (18), the yield of past experience "is symbolically transformed through being 'read-upon' as-yet undetermined situations." Itihel de la Sola Pool (19) has contrasted the use of foresight and hindsight. But whereas "revision" of the future is acceptable, hindsight needs to be related to the controversial aspects of historical "revision".

Use of a sight-based metaphor opens discussion on how such foresight might be enhanced. Can lookouts indeed be provided with "telescopes" or other "remote sensing" equipment? Joël de Rosnay has authored a book called Macroscope (20). This could lead into questions of the comparative "resolution" of different instruments.

To what extent is futures implicitly influenced by the developing understanding of the relationship between sight and time in astronomy? With telescopes astronomers effectively look millions of years "into the past" -- as determined by the speed of light and the distance of the phenomena. Using foresight, futurists engage in similar observations with respect to the future. In this case "distance" is created by limitations on ability to detect faint signals and interpret them as emerging trends. The greater the difficulty, the greater the distance, and the greater the dependence on the "resolving capacity" of the observer. But in complete contrast to the astronomical case, the greater the distance, the further "into the future" lies the emergence of the phenomena so detected. But whilst a particular observer may detect such phenomena as "distant", for another observer the trends may be a matter of daily experience. This calls for attention to the conceptual distance between futurists and the challenges of communication between them, especially when the developing understanding of each observer ensures that they are not "static". Responding to positions in a researcher's paper of 30, 10, or even 3 years past, may be somewhat meaningless, if the author has "moved on". The theory of relativity might indeed provide a metaphor to clarify the relationship between such moving frames of reference (21). Experientially, the past for one observer, maybe the future for another -- ageing offers a prime example.

The metaphor suggests the possibility of defects of sight and the dysfunctional ways in which images of the future may be captured on a collective "retina". This has led to occasional references to the short-sightedness of short-term decision-making in terms of myopia (as in myopic leadership). But the other possible defects of sight have never been explored from this perspective. Long-sightedness (presbyopia) is the difficulty, that tends to arise with age, of accommodating the eye to near vision -- a problem of many visionaries and "far-sighted" people who are wont to stumble when taking the next step.

There are also the problems of astigmatism (distorted focus). Night myopia and the uncorrectable nature of colour blindness suggest further possibilities. What makes for a "distorted view" of the future? Clearly technocrats are sensitive to a particular spectrum of future possibilities, but not to those which many others consider vital. The range of such difficulties raises the question of how to correct for such defects using appropriate "corrective lenses". In this sense, perhaps what futures studies requires are opticians and an eye test!

(b) Without foresight

The constraints of future sensing based on an implicit sight metaphor (above) only really emerge by contrasting the understanding suggested through each other metaphoric sense. As explored below, these might include:

- "forehearing" or "forelistening", more commonly represented by popular interest in "foretelling" and "prediction" but also by the listening abilities of politicians and intelligence agencies;
- "foresmell", typified by the ability to "smell it in the wind" or that conditions "smell right";
- "foretaste", notably through samples of social problems that may get better or worse;
- "foretouch" or "forefeel", typified by popular expressions such as "I can feel it coming" and the US TV series "Touch the Future" produced by Michael Mendizza;
- "sixth sense", such as intuition (and possibly "foreboding", or "presentiment") now gaining recognition in management programmes acknowledging a faculty of entrepreneurs.

Insights through the foresight metaphor may be adulterated and confused with insights from these other metaphoric senses. Examples of their use are poorly represented in futures literature and appear less credible. This is to be expected in the case of inhibited or undeveloped functions, or with any deep-seated bias in favour of sight-based insight. But are they irrelevant to how people "feel" about the future? Beyond the need for corrective spectacles and night vision enhancement, is there merit in considering "hearing aids" (of which the USA/NSA Big Ear electronic surveillance project is perhaps the most costly example), and the protective use of "canaries"
when "mining" the future ? "Whistleblowers" and "moles" have related functions.

(c) "Forehearing"

A sight-based metaphor is to be expected to yield riches in the visual culture of the West. But a term such as "forehearing" does not exist, although it may be of significance in aural cultures. Scouting parties are however required to make use of hearing, and within the ship metaphor the sound of a "foghorn" may be vital in detecting future dangers. Bells are tied to the necks of the herd animals of a tribe to locate them over long distances. Reference is made in the futures literature to hearing the "voices" of the future -- especially in relation to children, but also to future generations more generally. Jacques Attali has reviewed the importance of musical forms of particular epochs as prefiguring future social organization. In this sense the organization of contemporary music can be considered as structuring our sensitivity to credible forms of social organization that may later emerge.

It could be argued that it is "prediction" (or foretelling) that engenders an aural response to the future. Prediction plays an important role in many aural cultures, even today. In the West it is primarily associated with a supposedly unhealthy interest in dubious systems of divination. As such it may be considered a repressed function, although its various manifestations are reputed to attract more funding than most academic research programmes. "Channelling", as a modern manifestation, has become a major phenomenon, especially in North America.

Despite the above, metaphorical use of hearing is significant to politicians who praise themselves for "listening" to the electorate. Political leaders are often rated successful because they knew how to "listen" to the population to detect emerging problems -- reminiscent of the skills of a physician in auscultation. Strangely, despite its importance to Western thinking, people listen to feedback rather than viewing it in any way.

Again it may be asked what might be supplied to enhance the capacity of visual cultures to "hear" the future. From what defects might the hearing capacity of society (or the futures movement) be suffering? Some form of "deafness" is clearly a potential problem calling for some form of "hearing aid". Superficial absence of deafness may disguise inability to hear sounds of higher frequency, notably as a result of being effectively deafened by high decibel sound. This is an increasing problem for the young. Tone deafness is the inability to distinguish different tones. Little if anything can be done for such problems.

(d) "Foresmell"

Use of metaphors based on the olfactory function are not common in futures literature. A term such as "foresmell" or its equivalents does not exist. But such a sense is not uncommon in folk references to future events, notably the ability to "smell it in the wind". Expressions such as "the future stinks" would be quite understandable in contemporary discussion, but they give little understanding of how that perception is arrived at. Mention might also be made of the traditional use of canaries to detect a developing problem of gas in mines.

As the canary case highlights, the only means that has been effectively developed to enhance the sense of smell is indirectly through the use of animals. Whether man's sense of smell has been effectively lost in responding to the future, the interesting possibility of using animals points to the importance of species endangerment and extinction as indicators of the nonviability of the future.

(e) Foretaste

Metaphors based on the taste function are not common in futures literature. "Foretaste" is of course commonly used to refer to any presently accessible sample of what the future may bring. It is notably used by those hearing warnings (or threats) of impending disaster who refer to current experience of minor disasters as an example of what may come. It is more common in fiction whether in referring to a warning beating (such as by those seeking protection money) or to a sample of pleasures to come in a seduction scene.

It could be argued that in terms of this metaphor, there has been a numbing of the tastebuds, or a loss of ability to taste the future. In a sense the future has lost its taste for many -- it will be more of the same, or worse. Efforts to enhance the capacity to taste the future could take the form of offering experiences of positive and negative conditions as a foretaste -- wine tastings might prove an interesting metaphor. Many alternative communities would believe that they offer a foretaste of a positive future. Disadvantaged individuals and communities provide the negative equivalent -- of which the problems of ageing are common to all.

(f) "Foretouch"

There are few future-oriented metaphors based on touch in the futures literature. One possible exception is that of "being out of touch", which is much exploited by telephone service publicity. The ability to "forefeel" is however common in popular language in expressions such as: "I can feel it coming", "I can feel it in my bones". One of the functions of a scouting party is of course to make "contact" with a potential enemy.

Many in the West would associate the weakness of this ability with widespread loss of feeling and increasing self-centredness, and the inability to "reach out and touch" one's neighbour in distress. People can be "touched" by the tragic situation of others. Neither of these has implications for touching the future.

(g) "Sixth sense"

Metaphoric references to any sixth sense in relation to the future tend to be confined to popular language where action on the basis of "intuition", "gut feeling" or "foreboding" is fairly common. A number of management programmes and texts now make specific reference to the importance of intuition for an entrepreneur in assessing future possibilities -- although it is questionable whether this is a metaphoric usage. There are also scathing references to the ability of "rats" to determine in advance when to desert an enterprise in distress.

Importance of the choice of metaphor
Does it matter which metaphor is used to sense the future? Possibly not under ideal circumstances -- but certainly when use of a particular metaphor ensures a "blinkered" approach and there is insensitivity to its limitations. Dependence on the sight metaphor ensures difficulties with "blindspots" and viewing the obscured side of any phenomenon -- only "line of sight" vision is then productive (in the absence of any system of mirrors). The existence of shadow becomes important to give any sense of perspective -- creating difficulties with the significance attached to such shadow, however temporary, especially when it engenders blame.

Stressing the importance of imaginative "vision" represses other perceptions with the aid of which more integrated understanding can be achieved. As with photographic information, it completely conceals whether a place suffers from noise or odour pollution. Many future "scenarios" suffer from such metaphorical dependency and are thus insensitive to the alienating implications of an "odourless" future devoid of feeling. It is strange that tradition often associates blindness with the capacity for future vision, notably in the archetypal "blind soothsayer". What are the "images" and "visions" of an aural or olfactory culture? Although the "visions" of a blind musician or gardener would of course have their own limitations.

Each sense has strengths and weaknesses. It is their complementarity that has ensured survival. Other than sight, they all function in obscurity, with hearing and smell providing information irrespective of obstacles. Obsession with "clarity" may then distract from other forms of knowledge. Touch is important when faced with visual illusions. Despite other information, taste may be the only means of evaluating potential nourishment. Ignoring such "non-Western" dimensions has unfortunate consequences for development programmes according to Andreas Fuglesang (22).

It would be incorrect to argue that only sight provides information from a distance (in "lookout" mode). This is true of hearing and smell -- which are vital to the survival of many animals. Using a multi-sense framework, it is clearer that the future can emerge from any "direction". An animal dependent on smell would not survive long if it assumed that the future is "down the track" -- even if there are optional branchings. Using a multi-sense framework, it is clearer that the future can emerge from any "direction". An animal dependent on smell would not survive long if it assumed that the future was always "upwind". Human society may be dangerously dependent on the notion that the future is "forwards" along a line of sight.

### Metaphoric traps in sensing the future

**a) The future as "what"**

In terms of spatial metaphors, the future offers the opportunities of "leaps", "jumps" and "breakthroughs". There is much regret that new "frontiers" have not been found to which young pioneers could be drawn. In the same vein, the future is also a place that can be "colonized". Property there can in effect be purchased, if only in terms of options on the "futures market". There is a sense in which a stranglehold can be obtained on the future through judicious acquisition of intellectual property (23).

Using temporal metaphors, the future has been envisaged in terms of a Golden Age to come, respecting a symmetry with a past Golden Age from which civilization has supposedly decayed. Optimists refer to the "good times" to come and story-tellers speak of "living happily ever after".

The future may also be understood in terms of metaphors derived from conditions, values or the governing order. This includes references to the "Thousand Year Reich", the Kingdom of God, the emerging New World Order, global unity, global village, or Gaia, the resacralized Earth. For those in therapy or on a spiritual quest, the future may be understood through appropriate symbols in terms of greater psychic integration or a state of grace. Traditional tools for divination depend much on metaphor to describe auspicious and inauspicious future conditions. The Australian aborigines express their future in terms of the Dreaming and the Dreamtime. Articulations of utopias use this mode which has an a-temporal, eternal quality to it (also suggested by the previous paragraph).

**b) The future as "where"**

Implicit spatial metaphors, derived from the scouting party or the ship, suggest that the future is located in some direction "forwards". This suggests it is some kind of place -- to which time travellers have access in science fiction. Such metaphors condition people to think in terms of time as a linear arrow. In this sense society is confined to carriages on railtracks going into the future. The future is "down the track" -- even if there are optional branchings.

These metaphors obscure the possibility that future surprises may emerge "from behind", "from below" or "from above" -- although these directions are a real concern to a migrating tribe or a ship. Associating the future with forwards may therefore encourage a dangerously blinkered perspective on the source and nature of surprises. "Forwards" may be the direction in which we would like to encounter the future, because forwards implies that we are advancing -- or at least facing the potential source of surprise. But the turbulent condition of society may be too complex for this wish to be fulfilled on all occasions. In psychoanalytic terms our future may lie through our past and may emerge from what we believe that we have left behind.

Another location for the future emerges from such phrases as "the future is in the children" or "the future is in me". As with metaphorical uses of seed-to-plant, the future is here enfolded into the potentials lying within a person.

The physicist David Bohm (24) has argued for what amounts to an understanding of the future as enfolded into an implicate order that becomes explicit over time. There is an a-temporal quality to his proposal especially in that explicit phenomena may become re-enfolded, only to become explicit again at some later time. Arthur Young (25) has expressed a related view: "compaction of time would give it the character of omnipresence -- not going "backward" in time, away from the present, but instead going more deeply into the present".

**c) The future as "which"**

Much futures literature is concerned less with what future and more with how to discover and choose between "alternative" futures. The focus is on eliciting and articulating such options, and developing decision-making and consensus. This might be considered a content-free policy-sciences approach.
(d) The future as "when"

Metaphors implying that the future is in some way "forwards" relate to the debate on the nature of "progress". In this sense the future is simply in some future time, at a later calendar date. But there are a number of ways of understanding time (26). For many in non-Western cultures, the future is not associated with such a linear understanding of progress but rather with a recognition of recurring cycles. This cyclic understanding may prove to be more consistent with economic and social cycles, as well as with the cycles in an individual's lifespan (27). This approach downplays any sense of the future as a place in favour of an emphasis on recurring stages in a process -- possibly on a "higher turn of the spiral".

Those with more apocalyptic tendencies, and there are many, consider that the world as we know it will cease to exist or to function within a relatively short period, measured variously in days, years, or decades. Peter Russell (28) has developed an interesting variant from Terence McKenna concerning the exponential increase in the "rate of ingression of novelty into the world". This charts the historical increase in intensity of psycho-social activity in cycles, each with a period one sixty-fourth of the previous one, leading to a final crisis in 2012. In this sense the future is subject to a form of time compression, a possibility noted by Jeremy Rifkin (29), and associated with a progressive reduction in attention span (Toffler's "blip culture"). More positively, this may be seen in terms of understanding the future as "now" (28).

For Rifkin, changes in the future of civilization take place only with corresponding changes in conception of time. Temporal compression is what is now being used by the "efficiency" culture as a weapon against those with other cultural rhythms. A change in the metaphor(s) through which time is understood is then a key to a new relationship to the future.

(e) The future as "who"

For many the future can only be understood metaphorically as configured around archetypal figures, whether the returning Christ, the Maitreya Buddha, or the next Imam -- or even the Anti-Christ. A guru succeeds by progressively transforming the devotional metaphor through which he is understood by a disciple as the door to the future. Personal saviours may take political forms, especially in Camelot situations: "Bill Clinton is the future". Social advancement for many is only possible through a patron who is the focus of fantasies. Romantic love, whether yearned for or achieved, represents a reconfigured, timeless future only describable through poetic metaphor.

(f) The future as "how"

The future may primarily be understood in terms of how it is brought about or experienced. There is much use of constructional metaphors through which the future is "built". On the other hand, others are expected to become "victims" of the future if conditions shift to place them at a disadvantage. In this vein, the rapid accumulation of problems and the avoidance of considered response, can make of the future a situation in which "the chickens come home to roost". From a career perspective, with rising unemployment, people may perceive themselves as "having no future".

Metaphor is widely used in texts on management strategy as in Riding the Waves of Change (30), When Giants Learn to Dance (31) and perhaps most extensively in Strategy of the Dolphin (32) and in the Japanese Five Rings (33).

In non-Western cultures descriptions of the future may emphasize fatalistic or karmic aspects, reaping what one has sown, or some notion of destiny and predestination.

(g) The future as "why"

The above cases all configure the future in terms of some kind of answer. The future may also be understood through the questions it poses. For the inquiring mind, it may be only the emergence of new questions which give content to the future and make it livable. For the suicidal, the questions may prove too radical. For some the question may be whether humanity deserves a future.

Metaphoric games conditioning policy

It might seem to be unnecessary to explore the language of policy-makers, but it is useful to note the limited number of linguistic devices through which policy initiatives are currently articulated. It is also important to recognize how much of organization jargon was developed by the Catholic religious orders from the 10th to 15th century. Terms like general assembly, commission, congress, committee, "ordre du jour", and ministry all derive from that context (34).

Lakoff and Johnson have reviewed ways in which conceptualization is carried out within frameworks dependent on the understanding of directionality implicit in: to and from; up and down; in and out; centre and periphery. They stress that although such polar oppositions "are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures the future is in front of us, whereas in others it is in the back" (5, p. 14)

Much use is made in futures literature of an implicit construct or construct metaphor that draws its advantages from the mechanical unambiguosness of building. References to "frameworks", "building the future", "institution building", are of this kind. "Scenario" and "model" may also be used with such implications.

Understanding of relationships, desirable goals or destabilizing conditions, is strongly conditioned by numeric qualities. Thus words associated with oneness (unity, agreement, consensus) are betoken positive achievement. Those associated with twoness tend to be seen either positively (collaboration, cooperation, etc) or negatively (difference, disagreement, etc). There is little understanding of relationships dependent on higher orders of patterning (38). But in Asia the capacity of certain number combinations to betoken auspicious or inauspicious circumstances is taken extremely seriously.

It is also important to recognize the ways in which simple geometry is used to articulate understandings of policy agendas and debates: points (on an agenda), line (of argument), angle (of approach), area (of concern), triangle (of political forces), a square (deal), a volume
The question to be asked is whether there are not fundamental restrictions or biases in our uses of these devices to understand and respond to the emerging future. For example, can policies of sufficient complexity (in terms of Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety) be based on the simple geometry implied by the previous paragraph? It may be argued that more integrative approaches need to explore configurations of "lines of argument" and "areas of concern" which could be best understood through three-dimensional polyhedra, rather than through the zero-, one- and two-dimensional geometrical elements currently favoured (39). And, given the need of computer technologists to explore 4-dimensional hyper-structures, it may be asked whether these too could not prove important. It is no longer helpful to "make a point" in a debate or "develop a line of argument", unless these can be integrated into more comprehensive structures as a basis for action. Might these not be the basis for higher orders of consensus appropriate to a "new world order" of requisite complexity?

Developing a metaphoric language

It should not be forgotten that metaphor has been widely used in policy situations in civilizations of the past, notably in China and Japan. It was especially valued because of the way it enabled ambiguity and complexity to be handled without the traps associated with over-definition. This perspective is extensively explored in the section on metaphors in the Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential (40, Section MZ). It is therefore possible to make a case for the exploration of the insights to be derived from policy-making from the process of poetry-making (41). This can be extended to music (42) and, more speculatively, to the other arts (43). It could prove to be of vital importance in more aural cultures, notably those deprived of some of the advantages of industrialized countries. Geometrical metaphors can be used to configure environmental issues (44) and these can be related back to figurative art (45).

The complexities of society and the global problematique are such that the shift in focus advocated may well only occur in isolated groups, corporations and countries, if at all. But development of such a language offers opportunities for the individual and for affinity groups. Individuals may relatively easily choose to make much more extensive use of metaphor to provide themselves with quite different ways of restructuring their perceptual and cognitive environments. This may be done, as it is to some degree at present, quite superficially and primarily for rhetorical or illustrative purposes. There is however little to prevent individuals and groups from selecting or designing metaphors to be used over an extended period of time to structure their perceptions and their communications. Such use is evident in the implicit use of military and sporting jargon amongst management groups already. The same be said of the language of students and youth gangs.

What would it take to develop a coherent metaphorical language able to reframe many of the issues and constraints with which individuals and societies are faced?

Rather than imply that there was a need to start from scratch on an exploration of questionable status, there is a case for recognizing how both individuals and groups are already creatively dependent on such languages in articulating their group relationships. To some degree they even define group boundaries, as has emerged from work at the Weatherhead School of Management of the Case Western Reserve University. The challenge is therefore more one of becoming conscious of such languages and then to seek ways of developing their scope. The current cultural emphasis on resuscitating ethnic languages (eg Basque, Catalan) could then be matched by the development of metaphorical languages as a vehicle for conceptual identity.

More challenging is the possibility of deliberately building up a metaphorical language, if only for special purposes. Traditionally this has been done as a vehicle for romantic or political discourse -- as continues to be evident in new popular and protest songs. The question is to what degree it is possible to go beyond that and effectively elaborate what amounts to secret languages. This route has been pursued in the past by esoteric secret societies, notably in the case of alchemy. But it could also be argued that many academic disciplines are no more than sophisticated metaphorical structures, deliberately or inadvertently designed to exclude the uninitiated.

Suppose that many of the major challenges to modern society and to individual fulfilment were to be seen as arising from the inadequacy of the metaphorical language through which we seek to communicate about them and effectively create new realities. There is certainly evidence for this. Political discourse seeking to reconcile opposing perspectives could benefit from richer frameworks. Inter-disciplinary discourse between academic realms is severely handicapped by the absence of any effective language (46). Inter-faith dialogue is in a pathetic condition at a time when conflicts based on religion (eg Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Middle East, Kashmir) are a major concern (47).

How then to go about elaborating a systematic language of this kind? The way forward would seem to lie in taking an existing framework and using it as a template from which a metaphorical equivalent may be derived. The discipline of poetry-making is one example, as noted above (41). Music, and the theory of harmony, are another. Architectural design is another, as exemplified by a metaphorical experiment (48) using Christopher Alexander's rich "pattern language" (49). Such experiments suggest the possibility of "re-reading" the conceptual schemes of many disciplines in this light.

Reframing institutional futures

The credibility of institutions and remedial proposals is at an all-time low -- as is that of the disciplines upon which they draw. The level of collective impotence has been made clear by the situations in Somalia and Yugoslavia and the underachievement at the Earth Summit in Rio. Any basis for rethinking is therefore welcome.

The question that arises here is whether institutions and disciplines are trapped in metaphors inappropriate to more fruitful initiatives. "Forwards" to a "better place" may be appropriate when all is calm and a sense of direction can be maintained. In conditions of turbulence, when few bearings are obtainable or reliable, there may be more to learn by basing action on other metaphors. When one can no longer "see", then the other senses acquire greater importance.
It could prove useful to review the limited terminology used to meet, organize, plan and manage for the future. There are strong indications that implicit metaphors condition thinking so as to divert attention from vital opportunities. Gareth Morgan (50) has noted a range of possible images of organization which offer alternatives to the mechanistic one for which terms like "assembly" are appropriate. Due to the contextual insensitivity of their invasive and deterministic implications, "project" and "programme" would seem to be prime candidates for reassessment.

But as Donald Schon (13, 15) has argued, it is the language of problems and opportunities which most needs to be reviewed. As one example, the language of "unemployment" and "job slots" merits careful examination, even if there is but a faint possibility of a breakthrough. It could prove to be the case that such language effectively hinders the emergence of ability to engender viable economic roles or, more importantly, socially meaningful roles.

**Configurations of metaphors**

It is extraordinary the extent to which collaboration between groups and sectors is inhibited by entrapment in seemingly isolated metaphors. One example is the antagonism between the academic, so-called "language of the head" and the "language of the heart" of many alternative communities. This battle between the "heartless heads" and the "headless hearts" has lost sight of the metaphoric underpinnings that establish a context in which both head and heart are vital organs -- but are themselves insufficient for system functionality.

Attention should be given to the ways in which metaphors can be used as weapons to entrap and isolate -- and even kill (51). The dubious literature on spells and spell-binding might even prove suggestive in understanding how the magic of public relations can sustain the illusion that a programme of exploitation is really development. Most sterile debates make full use of metaphors to trap the adversary in a polarized position from which he or she can be subdued with metaphoric weapons derived from the opposite pole.

With the resounding failure of isolated economic models, what appears to be lacking is any ability to work with a configuration of complementary frameworks. As the example of the future suggests, there is much to be gained by working with a configuration of metaphors to capture different facets of a situation that cannot be effectively encompassed by a single metaphor, as with "waves" and "particles" in light physics. In this sense all metaphors must be considered suspect, and like certain medicines, only to be used with others selected to protect against their side-effects.

Buddhist scholars have done much to explore the relations between the senses, especially as metaphoric carriers of other levels of insight calling for an appropriate balance between different forms of information (52). They would approve the emphasis of Slaughter's approach to foresight as involving "a conscious effort to expand awareness (and understanding) to clarify the dynamics of emerging situations" (18), whilst wondering at the restriction to foresight. The Sanskrit classic, the Rg Veda, has been studied by Antonio de Nicolas (53) in terms of the four complementary conceptual languages it uses to encompass the developmental complexity with which it deals. This work has been related to theories of classification using non-Boolean lattices of complementary languages (54).

**Specific application**

The arguments above may be used to strengthen resolve in opposing the current obsession with consensus as the royal road to the solution of all organizational difficulties in responding to social challenges. Governance itself may be seen as the art of managing the relationship between different visions or strategies, rather than striving vainly to combine them into a single compromise that satisfies few of constituencies.

**Coherent sub-visions**

The question for governance would then be how to cluster sub-visions into a set of distinct visions (possibly denoted by colours, as in the political arena). This could mean shifting some agenda issues from one group to another to get sub-visions with the highest degree of coherence and distinctiveness. But of course visions can overlap, like Venn diagrams (and spherical Venn diagrams are especially interesting), so all can subscribe to one or more visions of local or world society, and shift between at will. It is at this global level of how the sub-visions are mapped in relation to one another that a higher order of consensus on the nature of world governance, for example, can emerge. There is a need to use available skills skills to elaborate ways of understanding such a higher order capable of 'holding' a range of somewhat incompatible or incommensurable sub-visions. But there is a need to resist any obligation to reify this structure into sets of institutions and commissions, although this could be a valid option for some.

How any legal or procedural options and obligations map onto such a higher order meta-vision is of some concern, but it is not of absolute importance. The United Nations, for example, is already more ordered than many bodies. It could be less organized for certain purposes - or even more organized. It could even have 'tracks' for those needing more order, and others for less order - in effect these amount to sub-visions in the above framework.

The plea would be to open the space in which the nature of this meta-vision can be discussed. The nature of the dialogue is closely related to the nature of the content. In that sense, and this is the key point, dialogue about the meta-vision is a structural embodiment of that meta-vision and of the meaningful essence of what constitutes a global organization. There is a sense in which what is important about such a global organization to some is its under-defined nature.

Definitions are good for sub-visions - and necessary for them. Holding sub-visions together calls for the flexibility of under-definition and the ability to live with the paradoxes and uncertainty which keep it alive. Many more metaphors are needed to explore such possibilities. But what is required above all is the dialogue space within which the advantages and disadvantages of different metaphors, for different purposes and sub-groups, can be defined.

**Bridging sub-visions**
It should not for a moment be thought that such preoccupations amount to an indulgence in philosophical games whilst Rwanda or Bosnia burns. The development of our collective ability to give coherence to a set of seeming incompatible collective sub-visions would seem to be the challenge faced in society at many levels. Such sub-visions reflect preferences of different types of people, with each of us possibly having an affinity for several, and a dislike for others. This is at the heart of the unresolved ethnic strife in so many places - as well as the strife between academic turf holders.

How bridges between these sub-visions are to be constructed, effectively providing communication pathways between different tendencies, is a non-trivial challenge in society today. The Internet ad hocery of 'lets have one more discussion group' is not enough. Such freedom, to be fruitful, must be balanced by some constraining 'mechanisms' - where mechanics may only be one possible metaphor, and probably the least appropriate at this time. It how we think about these which is the key.

Conclusion

Particular metaphors for configuring understanding of the future have specific advantages. They usually also have unsuspected weaknesses through which more fruitful initiatives may be handicapped. It would be a mistake to reject metaphor or aspire to the metaphor-free discourse desired by some information scientists. Metaphor is too fundamental to our conceptual processes. And as Kenneth Boulding, author of Image (1956), teasingly puts it: "Our consciousness of the unity of self in the middle of a vast complexity of images or material structures is at least a suitable metaphor for the unity of group, organization, department, discipline or science. If personification is a metaphor, let us not despise metaphors -- we might be one ourselves" (55). Ways should rather be sought to develop the conceptual scaffolding and flexibility that they offer for framing the future, especially to facilitate the emergence of new and more sustainable forms of social organization and problem responses. Many such policy-relevant possibilities have been reviewed elsewhere (40).

A marriage, if only of convenience, needs to be negotiated between the role of model and metaphor. Global modelling has proven inadequate to the challenge, and there is now a desperate search for unifying imagery -- if only for media sound-bites. Models need the inspiration of richer metaphors. Use of metaphors needs the discipline of modelling. The inadequacies of a model may well derive from pushing the underlying metaphor "too far". As Gregory Bateson has argued, a touch of poetic insight may increase understanding of how to move productively between metaphors, rather than pushing them to exhaustion.

"Future" itself may prove to be a metaphoric trap because of the way it is tied to time -- and especially linear time. As such it obscures a wider spectrum of understandings of the emergence of new situations -- notably surprises. A key debate (November 1992) in the UK House of Commons even focused on a policy "blackhole" -- the ultimate constraint on the sight metaphor. In the present confused times, with the loss of policy directionality, perceptions of shapes "looming" out of a fog or "bubbling up" from turbulent waters might have offered more appropriate metaphors. In this light, given Slaughter's (18) emphasis on "emerging situations", is our fundamental concern not more generally with "potentials" and their emergence, rather than specifically with those represented by "futures"? Or perhaps both are members of a larger set of complementary metaphors.

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