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## **Metaphor and stories in discourse about personal and social change**

L. David Ritchie

Wagoner, Brady, Jensen, Eric, and Oldmeadow, Julian (Eds.), *Culture and Social Change: Transforming society through the power of ideas*. London, UK: Information Age Publishing. 2012.

Barack Obama campaigned on the theme of ‘change,’ and as the first African-American to win the U. S. Presidency, he embodies changes of historical and cultural importance. Central among the changes Obama advocates is his attempt, throughout his campaign, to depart from the ‘old politics’ and keep racial issues in the background. However, at a crucial point in the campaign he was forced to confront these issues when a potentially damaging controversy erupted over a series of comments, widely regarded as unpatriotic, made by his personal friend and spiritual adviser, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. How Obama dealt with this crisis is a prime example of the role of metaphor and stories in discourse about change, both in promoting and in dealing with change.

According to the standard rationalist prescription, Obama would have been expected to reason with his critics and refute their accusations. A *logical* argument would lay out the issues to be decided in the form of propositions with truth-conditions or questions that can be answered by such propositions<sup>1</sup>. But Obama did not use conventional logic, and he did not spin out explanatory theories or refute alternative theories about the incident (Kuhn, 1991). Obama told stories, and he wove them together with a series of powerful, emotionally-charged metaphors. Using this and other examples of public and private discourse, in this essay I argue that the non-propositional aspects of language use is as important as “content,” and that the perceptual, imaginative, emotional

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<sup>1</sup> What Bruner (1987) calls the *paradigmatic* mode of thought, in contrast to what Bruner calls the *narrative* mode, that characterized the bulk of Obama’s speech.

and relational nuances of language use can reveal at least as much about the role of communication in social change as the propositional aspects.

A different sort of crisis, also related to the role of ‘change agent,’ confronted then British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the early stages of the 2005 Parliamentary election, when he faced the risk of an intra-party split over his policies that might have cost Labour the election. Here also, the prescriptions of logical argumentation would have called for propositions and rebuttals, theories and counter-theories. But Blair also chose stories and metaphors, some of them playful, humorous, and whimsical (Ritchie, 2008). In place of reasoned arguments, in his speech to the 2005 Labour Party Conference at Gateshead Blair mixed and transformed familiar metaphors, he told amusingly quaint stories, and Labour won the election.

A crisis of political and cultural change confronted Jo Berry and Pat Magee in a more traumatic and intensely personal way. After her father was killed by a bomb planted by Magee (acting as a member of the IRA), Berry went on a self-described ‘journey of understanding,’ seeking to ‘walk in the footsteps of the bombers’ and, when Magee was released in a prisoner exchange, sought him out and engaged him in a series of personal conversations (Cameron, 2007). Here again, traditional views of language and discourse would call for something more like a debate – an exchange of evidence-based facts, views, and carefully reasoned arguments. But here also, what actually occurred was an exchange of stories and metaphors. In her insightful analysis of these conversations, Cameron shows how Berry and Magee overcame their ‘alterity,’ their deep political and emotional differences, through use, repetition, and transformation of

metaphors and stories to achieve mutual empathy and understanding and build a relationship of trust and respect.

The subtitle of this volume, *Transforming society through the power of ideas*, carries a suggestion of *big* changes, brought about through *bold* ideas. In this reading, the role of communication might include transmitting information and ideas and persuading people to adopt and respond to these ideas, replacing previous ideological structures with new ones. All of this would be consistent with a traditional view of language as a *code* in which this kind of information transmission and persuasion is accomplished, and a view of discourse as a chain of facts and opinions expressed in the form of propositions.

I would not deny the value of what Bruner (1987) calls the “paradigmatic” mode of thinking, rational argument based on clear expression of evidence and views, either at the national and global level of politics and institutions or at the more intimate level of interpersonal relationships. However, it does appear from the examples briefly described above, and from examples I will discuss later in this essay, that a complete account of the way people use language in creating or resisting, adapting to or controlling change cannot stop with the propositional aspects of language. A complete account must also address the subtler and possibly more complex uses of language in stories and metaphors – and in word-play, humor, irony, and other examples of what Wilson and Sperber (2004) call ‘loose’ language use. In brief, I will suggest that “narrative” is at least as important as the “paradigmatic” expression of ideas in bringing about and dealing with social change.

In this essay I focus less on the code-like and more on the interactive and relational aspects of language and communication. I focus not only on the large-scale public processes of social and cultural transformation but also on the more intimate, often

quite personal processes through which people promote, resist, or accommodate change as they manage their everyday social realities. I analyze discourse about change as it occurs in casual, ordinary conversations as well as in political speeches and organized public events. I approach language use from a cognitive and interactive perspective, and show how attention to the patterns of story-telling, metaphor use and transformation, language play and humor can contribute to our understanding of change-based and change-related discourse.

### **A cognitive and interactive model of language.**

As mentioned in the preceding, Bruner (1987) drew a sharp distinction between what he called the *paradigmatic* or logico-scientific mode of thought and the *narrative* mode, and claimed that these are mutually irreducible. However, Barsalou (1999) demonstrated that it is, in principle, possible to explain even abstract (*paradigmatic*) logic in terms of “perceptual simulations”<sup>2</sup> (by incorporating *introspective* perception of one’s own mental processes), thus contradicting Bruner’s claim that the two are irreducibly separate. Glenberg (2008) argues that the brain evolved primarily to control action, and produces extensive experimental evidence that language comprehension involves the simulation of action. Other evidence suggests that the computational demands of living in large, complex social groups may have been a more important factor in the evolution of large brains (e.g. see Dunbar & Schultz, 2007). Based on his research with individuals for whom reasoning was separated from emotion because of brain damage, Damasio (1995) argues that emotion is neither coincidental nor antithetical, but an essential part of effective reasoning.

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<sup>2</sup> The partial activation of the same neural groups that would become active in direct perception or action; perceptual simulation will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of this essay.

Other evidence suggests that, whatever might be theoretically desirable, people do not naturally engage in the kind of paradigmatic argument advocated by Bruner. In a field experiment testing people's ability to construct and refute alternative explanations of common occurrences, Deanna Kuhn (1991) discovered that the only participants who could reliably satisfy her *a priori* expectations for constructing an argument, even within their own fields of expertise, were advanced doctoral candidates in philosophy (for detailed discussion see Ritchie, 1994; 2003). In research on political advertising, Cappella and Jamieson (1994) have shown that the verbal content of ads is overwhelmed by the effect of accompanying images.

Traditional code / propositional models of language and associated linear models of communication have recently been challenged from several perspectives. Wilson and Sperber (2004) point out that virtually all language is 'loose' in the sense that meanings of words and phrases are under-determined and require interpretation according to their relevance in a specific context. The fundamental ambiguity of language limits the precision of communication but at the same time greatly increases the expressive power of language. Based on this assessment, Wilson and Sperber claim that metaphor is but an extreme example of this fundamental ambiguity and is processed in exactly the same way as any other language (see also Wilson & Carston, 2006).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980; Lakoff, 2008) argue that metaphors observed in language use are manifestations of underlying *conceptual* metaphors, which develop from associations within perceptual experience and provide the basis for abstract conceptual thought. Lakoff and Johnson claim that commonplace expressions (often regarded as "*dead*" metaphors) such as 'a *warm* relationship,' 'a *close* friend,' or 'a *big*

problem' all originate in and provide evidence

of correlations between physical sensations

(physical warmth and proximity, perceived size)

and more abstract concepts (love and friendship,

problem-solving). Lakoff and Johnson, along

with various collaborators, have identified

hundreds of verbal metaphors which, they

claim, instantiate underlying conceptual

mappings of this sort. Of particular importance

are groups of metaphors based on common

experiences such as TRAVEL, CONSTRUCTION, and CONFLICT<sup>3</sup> (in addition to those already mentioned).

**Notation:** I use the convention of marking metaphorical phrases by placing the metaphorical elements in italics and the entire phrase within quotation marks. I refer to the concept that is described or expressed by the metaphor – for example the quality of a relationship – as the “*topic*” of the metaphor, the metaphorical words or phrase – in this case, “*warm*” or “*close*” – as the “*vehicle*.” Following the convention used in the journal, *Metaphor and Symbol*, I put the broader concept underlying the vehicle in small caps, e.g., AFFECTION IS PHYSICAL WARMTH.

Gibbs (2006; see also Lakoff, 2008) argues that both metaphorical and literal uses of language activate *simulations* based on *schemas* (inter-connected sets of perceptual and motor experience). For example, the word *fire* activates simulations of a set of visual, tactile, and audial perceptions associated with combustion, and the word *up* activates simulations of visual and perhaps visceral perceptions of vertical motion. When we read or hear a metaphorical use of a word, as for example ‘prices are going *up* again,’ we experience a *conceptual blend* in which *prices* are understood in terms of *objects* that are in *vertical motion*.<sup>4</sup> Gibbs (1994; 2006; Gibbs & Matlock, 2008) reviews extensive

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay I will follow Lakoff and Johnson’s inclusive definition of metaphor as experiencing (or expressing) one kind of thing as or in terms of another – thus, “*warm relationship*” is understood as metaphorical because *affection* is experienced in terms of *physical temperature* (see Zhong & Leonardelli, *in press*).

<sup>4</sup> Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that we actually experience prices *as* objects and inflation *as* vertical motion.

experimental evidence in support of this claim.<sup>5</sup> The idea of simulations goes beyond the conventional idea of imagination: in perceptual simulation, the neural circuits that would be fully activated by direct perception of *fire* or *vertical motion* are partially activated by encountering these concepts in language, either literal or metaphorical (Barsalou, 2007).

Barsalou (2007) acknowledges that language, including metaphorical language, is sometimes processed in terms of connections to other words and phrases (see for example Kintsch, 1998; Landauer & Dumais, 1997). However, he argues that deeper processing of language (and more complex reasoning) is accomplished through perceptual simulations, the partial activation of the same neural groups that would become active in direct perception.<sup>6</sup> Given the constraints of cognitive capacity, the perceptual simulations experienced during language processing and during thought in general are always incomplete (it is easy to imagine, or simulate, the perceived shape of a zebra and its pattern of stripes – but not to count the stripes). Which aspects of a concept are experienced is largely determined by what is most salient in the present context (cf. Giora, 2008; Sperber & Wilson, 1985; 2008).<sup>7</sup>

**Metaphors in Obama’s speech.** When Obama characterized Reverend Wright’s language as ‘*incendiary*’ and referred to the ensuing controversy as a ‘*firestorm*,’ according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory hearers would actually experience Wright’s

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<sup>5</sup> Lakoff and Johnson include highly-conventionalized or “*dead*” metaphors such as “*big*” problem and “*close*” relationships within this explanation. For criticisms of their position see for example Glucksberg and McGlone (1999), Murphy (1996), and Vervaeke and Kennedy (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Direct perception includes *interoception*, perception of one’s own bodily state, and *introspection*, perception of one’s own thoughts and emotions. As noted in the preceding, abstract reasoning, according to Barsalou, is accomplished through these introspective simulations of cognitive experience.

<sup>7</sup> Resolving the question of the relative importance of paradigmatic logic, emotion, and perceptual simulation in cognition is beyond both the scope of this essay and the author’s competence. The purpose here is rather to argue for the importance of metaphors and narratives for understanding the actual discursive processes through which people bring about, resist, and accommodate to social change and transformation.



language *as* a fire, based on the underlying conceptual metaphor, PASSION IS HEAT. This is a common and familiar conceptual metaphor, expressed in poetry and music<sup>8</sup> as well as everyday usage (e.g., ‘That *burns me up*’). Perceptual simulations activated by these metaphors are accomplished through partial activation of the neural circuits that would be fully activated by actual perceptions of intense fire. By repeating the metaphors based on FIRE and HEAT, Obama reinforced the underlying conceptual metaphor, intensifying and probably extending the experienced simulations. For some of his listeners, this phrasing may also have evoked other connections with *fire* (both semantic and perceptual), including the Biblical allusion used as a title by African-American writer James Baldwin, ‘*The fire next time*,’ as well as the race riots of the late 1960s that spawned the slogan, ‘*burn, baby, burn.*’ Obama picks up the related HEAT metaphor in the phrase ‘*seared into my genetic makeup*,’ a phrase that also has the potential to evoke emotionally intense connections with the practice of branding slaves with hot irons.

Obama used repetition and transformation of common metaphors extensively, including metaphors based on JOURNEY. At the beginning of his ‘*campaign*,’ Obama set the task to ‘*continue the long march* of those who *came before* us.’ The use of this metaphor potentially links the campaign to the *literal* ‘freedom marches’ of the Civil Rights movement as well as to the more conventional ‘*march of progress*’ metaphor. Asserting the need for unity, Obama observes that ‘we may not have *come from the same place*,<sup>9</sup> but we all want to *move in the same direction*.’ Referring to the temptation to

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<sup>8</sup>A good example is Peggy Lee’s masterful version of *Fever*, in which the “coolness” of her voice contrasts with and thus emphasizes the “heat” of her passion.

<sup>9</sup>“we may not have *come from the same place*” can be interpreted literally as well as metaphorically – Obama *comes from* Indonesia and Hawaii as well as Chicago, his mother and grandmother *came from* Kansas, and his father *came from* Kenya. His later reference to relatives “scattered across three continents” reinforces a literal reading.

ignore ‘the issues that have *surfaced*... that we’ve never really *worked through*,’ Obama asserts that ‘if we *walk away* now... simply *retreat into our respective corners*<sup>10</sup>, we will never be able to *come together*...’

Cameron (2007; 2008) argues that this kind of repetition and transformation of metaphors provides clues to the speaker’s underlying patterns of thought and reveals the processes through which the conversation is managed and relationships between participants are developed. In her analysis of the ‘reconciliation dialogues,’ Cameron shows how Jo Berry’s use of the JOURNEY and HEALING metaphors are picked up, repeated, and transformed by Pat Magee as a sign of his growing empathy for Berry. Cameron argues that Berry’s acceptance of Magee’s use of metaphors originally introduced by her signals a change in their relationship.

**Stories.** Examples like those in the previous section illustrate a common but little-discussed aspect of metaphors: They often have the potential to activate *dynamic* schemas, invoking incomplete simulations of familiar stories. I have already alluded to the historical stories that may be activated by some of Obama’s metaphors; some of these are drawn from the history of the Civil Rights Movement, some from shared U.S. history. In the reconciliation dialogues, Jo Berry’s expression of her wish to ‘*walk in the footsteps of the bombers*’ may remind hearers or readers of relevant aspects of the intersecting stories of the IRA terror campaign and Berry’s own search for understanding and healing.

Many of the metaphors in Blair’s speech also imply stories. When Blair said he would ‘welcome lost friends *back into the fold*’ he referred to a story about shepherds that has powerful Christian resonance. The choice of Gateshead, in Blair’s home district, for

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<sup>10</sup> This is clearly a BOXING metaphor as well as a MOTION and SEPARATION metaphor.

the Labour Party conference and Blair's long reference to it early in his speech potentially activated a powerful story of (literal and figurative) '*homecoming*.'

Obama also used location to evoke shared stories. He delivered the race speech in Philadelphia's Constitution Center, and quoted from the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, thereby invoking the shared national story. The phrase, 'more perfect union,' captures an ideal of perfection as an ideal to work toward, not a state to be achieved for once and for all, an ideal Obama invoked later in the speech by strategic re-use of '*perfect*' in a similarly non-literal sense. Obama immediately invoked a second episode in the shared national history with his paraphrase and transformation of the opening lines of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, 'Two hundred and twenty one years ago... a group of men... *launched America's improbable experiment...*'<sup>11</sup> Thus he brought together the central themes of the Civil War and the Constitution which together provided a political and historical (as well as emotional) context for this speech about race relations – and for both bringing about the kind of transformations he sought, and helping his listeners to accept and embrace these transformations.

### **Stories and memory**

Schank and Abelson (1995) claim that stories are the primary medium of memory: How we tell something is how we remember it. Their first formulation of this idea implied that the first telling of a story in effect fixes *that* version as the way it is remembered, but they subsequently admitted that different versions of the same story can exist in parallel, and that re-telling of the story from a different perspective or in response to a different social situation can alter the way it is remembered. Schank and Abelson do

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<sup>11</sup> These phrases allude to the opening lines of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty..."

not address the implications of this theory for collective story-telling as a way of establishing and transforming collective memory but their overall account is entirely consistent with Sperber's (1996) ideas about the formation of 'cultural representations' through repetition and refining of a common story.

Pasupathi, Weeks, & Rice (2008) describe remembering and retelling as an important process in adult development, both for accomplishing transitions throughout adult life and for accomplishing developmental tasks specific to later life. They include within these developmental functions the maintenance and reinforcement of bonds within intimate relationships that are important throughout adulthood but especially later in life. Pasupathi et al. identify three broad functions of remembering and re-telling: those associated with the teller's sense of self, those associated with relationships with others, and those associated with problem-solving and goal-achievement. Like Schank and Abelson, Pasupathi et al. emphasize the individual level but their analysis also carries important implications for the collective level of groups and communities, the level at which social transformation is accomplished and encountered. These implications will become particularly evident in a later section in which I analyze a conversation among a group of neighbors about the role of sociability in maintaining a climate of public safety within a rapidly changing urban environment.

After setting the stage by blending the story of the founding of the nation, 'two hundred and twenty one years ago,' with the story of Lincoln and the Civil War and the story of the present occasion in which he was speaking, Obama proceeded to tell the story of his own Presidential candidacy. This allowed him to set the story of his relationship with Reverend Wright and of the controversy over Wright's language in the context of

both the national story and his personal story. He then reframed the Wright story in terms of the Civil Rights story, and the justifiable anger of African-Americans at the history of discrimination and deprivation.

Having responded to the controversy over Reverend Wright through a combination of historical and personal themes, Obama turned to stories about ordinary working-class white people, and asserted that *their* anger is also justifiable. This assertion was quite important because, in re-telling the familiar stories of enslavement and racial discrimination, Obama ran the risk that different segments of his *national* audience would understand and respond to the stories in different and mutually contradictory ways. By explicitly acknowledging the justified anger of working-class whites, Obama converted a potentially divisive theme into a potentially uniting theme. He then fused these parallel sets of generic stories into a single story of the current political and economic crisis, linking this composite story to his Presidential campaign, and closing with a final, intensely personal story about two volunteers in his campaign. By retelling these stories and blending them into a single coherent story, he made what was previously ‘the Black story’ and ‘the White story’ become ‘the American story’; ‘my’ story and ‘your’ story become ‘our’ story – which is one of the fundamental transformations he hoped to bring about.

Jo Berry and Pat Magee were involved in a similar integrative endeavor but on a much more personal level: They were brought together by a single act of violence situated within a long and complex national story. While this act of violence represented a single story it was understood very differently by each of them. Their primary purpose

was to ‘listen to each other’s story,’ and thereby to understand the dual nature of the single story, so it could be blended into one complex and multi-faceted story.

### **Stories and perceptual simulations.**

Stories are themselves frequently metaphorical, in the broad sense that they lead hearers, or more accurately teller and hearers together, to experience one story or situation in terms of another. Thus, when Blair said, ‘where we have *lost* old friends, we try to persuade them to *come back to the fold*,’ he drew on a story that was very likely familiar to most members of his audience (‘Jesus is the *good shepherd*’), a story that already had strong metaphorical overtones, and re-applied it in a layered metaphor (‘Tony Blair is the *good shepherd*.’)

In a more complex example, after reflecting on the early years of his Prime Ministership, Blair alluded to recent intra-party disputes over the Iraq war and other policy issues, then launched into another story: ‘all of a sudden there you are, the British people, thinking: you're not listening and I think: you're not hearing me. And before you know it you *raise your voice*. And *I raise mine*. Some of you *throw a bit of crockery*. And now you, the British people, have to *sit down* and decide whether you want *the relationship to continue*.’ Through this metaphorical story Blair re-expressed genuine political differences in terms of a marital spat, with many instantiations in popular culture. This metaphorical story may have worked both to trivialize political objections and to create a shared enjoyment of the humorous image. By re-telling the story of the political disagreements as a story of marital dispute – and potential reconciliation – Blair also established a new set of shared memories as the basis for renewed unity. The policy differences could potentially be thereby ‘forgotten’ or at least suppressed.

The amusing aspect of the '*throwing crockery*' story highlights another important function of language, the creation and reinforcement of social bonds through shared pleasure. Robin Dunbar (1996) refers to this process metaphorically as '*grooming*.'

**Language and Social Bonding.** Noting that about 65% of all talk, among both men and women, is about relationships, and not necessarily concerned with 'content' or the accomplishment of informational 'tasks' as traditionally construed, Dunbar (1996) argues that language fulfils two fundamentally social purposes, which he labels 'grooming' and 'gossip.' 'Grooming,' in Dunbar's view, serves an extension and amplification of the social grooming behavior observed in most other primates, that serves to build and maintain 'coalitions' necessary for individual animals to maintain their position in the social hierarchy. Conversation can comfortably take place among as many as four people, but it is possible for an animal to groom only one other animal at a time. Hence the substitution of language for grooming greatly increases the size of potential social networks, and enables humans to achieve and maintain much larger primary groups. 'Gossip,' in Dunbar's view, complements 'grooming' by providing information about others' relationships, and about the social behavior of other members of the group (Who is grooming whom? Who can be trusted? Who is a fink?)

The 'grooming' view proposed by Dunbar is consistent with the obvious fact that humans, everywhere, take pleasure in conversation. We enjoy talking, and we enjoy hearing other people talk. We especially enjoy listening to other people who talk well, who tell interesting stories and make funny quips – people who entertain us. The shared enjoyment of talk, very likely experienced physiologically as the release of endorphins, may contribute to bonding by associating our conversation partners with pleasure.

Dunbar's account is largely speculative and controversial<sup>12</sup>, but it is evident that people *do* get pleasure from talk, and often engage in talk when there is no evident information-transfer need ('Fine weather we're having, isn't it?'). Given Dunbar's estimate that about 2/3 of our time is spent talking about relationships or building and maintaining relationships through talk, the expression of paradigmatic propositions may not be nearly as important as traditional models of language use imply, and the shared enjoyment of interesting stories, metaphors, and humor may be much *more* important, a central rather than incidental function of language use. Extending this argument, Ritchie and Dyhouse (2008; see also Fazoni, 2008) show that apparently frivolous language play, including novel and apparently meaningless metaphors as well as humor and teasing, may serve important relational functions simply by virtue of the shared pleasure they give speaker and audience.

From this perspective, the corny humor in Blair's '*crockery throwing*' story played a crucial role in the speech. It must have been difficult even for his disgruntled critics to avoid at least a bit of a chuckle in response to the story, to avoid getting at least a bit of pleasure from the story. This bit of corny humor reinforced the impression that much of the speech was not about propositional 'content' or arguments at all – it was about '*grooming*,' pure and simple. Blair's metaphors and metaphorical stories very likely activated powerful perceptual imagery, and no doubt many listeners could not help experiencing pleasure as they processed these images (*guilty* pleasure perhaps, for some in the audience). Experiencing the same perceptual imagery, and experiencing at least a mild bit of enjoyable humor together, the audience strengthened and renewed their bonds

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<sup>12</sup> Dunbar's theory is supported by observed correlations between brain size and the size and complexity of social groups in many mammal and bird species, but it can also be criticized as biological reductionism



with each other – and with Blair. Only then, with the bonds re-established, did Blair proceed to the more conventional campaign rhetoric – listing the party’s campaign promises and excoriating the policies proposed by the opposition.

### **Managing social transformation at a personal and community level.**

Thus far I have focused primarily on the kind of cultural and political transformations of which epic novels and multi-volume histories are made. But people also confront change in the course of their everyday lives, as hopes and dreams materialize or fail to materialize, opportunities emerge or vanish, personal and professional roles change and familiar institutions mature or disappear. In this section I will analyze a conversation in which a group of neighbors used story-telling, thematic metaphors, and occasional bits of humorous teasing both to understand and to reinforce the sense of community that underpins the stability and safety of their neighborhood. Four residents of a single block in a middle-income neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, a mid-sized city in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, were invited to discuss concerns about crime and policing. It quickly became clear that the participants had little interest in the topic of policing and more interest in affirming and reinforcing their shared sense of neighborliness and community. In part, the participants were responding to general changes in the composition of the surrounding city and the neighborhood itself, in particular to changes associated with the natural succession of generations in their own neighborhood.

Throughout the conversation, several themes were woven together in a series of metaphors, metonyms, and stories. A central theme of *watchfulness* drew on a metonym, ‘*eyes on the street*,’ adapted from urban theorist Jane Jacobs’s (1961) classic study of the

social matrix of urban neighborhoods. This theme was connected with *sociability*, *mutual caring*, and *children as a resource* in several passages. Consistent with Bayley (1994) and Reed (1998), the primary focus throughout most of this conversation about public safety was not on the role of police agencies, but on the local community, the role of private citizens, both individually and in their ordinary communicative interactions, in maintaining a sense of public safety, and the implications of public safety for everyday activities and particularly for the activities of children.

Some of the stories focused on the contrast between this community and other, less 'safe' communities, but many of them focused on the shared history of this community itself, and on affirming the importance of children to the vitality of the community. These stories served 1) to create and perpetuate a consensus about sociability as a basis for the mutual watchfulness that assures the safety of the neighborhood, 2) celebrate 'the block' as a place to live that is both socially and physically *comfortable*, and 3) affirm intergenerational solidarity. Intergenerational solidarity was asserted by stories that affirmed the stake of older, childless couples in maintaining the street as a safe place for the children and by stories that affirmed the children themselves as sources of interest and pleasure, as sources of activity that reward the attention and watchfulness that renders the street and the neighborhood safe for them.

Although only one participant in the conversation has children, much of the conversation revolved around children. Children figured both as markers of public safety, a kind of 'indicator species' for the health and safety of the community, and as a focus of sociability and watchfulness, sources of interest and liveliness that attract and reward adult attention, and (referring to the older children who live on the next block

over) as additional ‘*eyes on the street.*’ Thus, children are not only vulnerable people to be protected but also valued resources to be enjoyed, made welcome, and retained in the community: In every instance in which children were mentioned, the vocal tone was warm and affectionate.

Several of the stories described how the four sets of parents on the block collaborate in supervising – and entertaining – their children. Speaking for the other childless participants, Rich asserted that ‘it’s not just the ^parents^. I mean it’s the *rest of us.*’ A few minutes later, Leanne reinforced this idea with a story of her own about walking home from the bus-stop when the kids are home from school, and ‘they’re ^out there^ *having fun.. and I can talk to them and visit.. walking to our house...*’ This segment continued with an account (produced collaboratively with Todd) of how the four sets of parents trade off responsibility for watching the children. From Leanne’s story it is evident that the children ‘out there having fun’ are a source of enjoyment to her. The fact that Todd (the one parent in the group) collaborated with her in telling the story suggests that the exchange successfully produced a ‘shared reality’ (Higgins, 2003).

Leanne made her enjoyment of the children on the street even more evident in a passage, ten minutes later, in which she described an interaction with one of the children who live near the end of the block:

I was walking *down* the street.. she was sitting there she .. she^ jumps up^ and she said.. I said How are you she said.. Today was the ^first day^ of ^first ^grade^^!  
^and it was just ^wonderful^^! And she had on this .. this ^black^ leotard and white tights and little shoes.. and she said.. ^and^ I’m going to be going to ^dance class^ now.. and ^after^wards my dad is going to take me to the ^park^ and it’s like the

^best^ day of my ^life^! eh heh!.. and she was ^literally^ bouncing up.. and..  
down.. I mean she could not ^stay still^ .. she was so excited ... that was just...  
^wonder^ful .. you know? it was just ^fantastic^ to be able to live on a street where  
you can ^see that^ every day

Through this and other stories, related in tones of affection and amusement, Leanne and the other childless participants made it clear that they see the presence of young children in the neighborhood as adding value, both because of the social relationships they crystallize and because of their contribution to the liveliness of the street. On the surface, these stories were told to instantiate the sense of security and sociability, and the relationship between sociability and security. But they also appear to have been part of a strategy of building and maintaining the integration of the young families in the community, and securing the continued commitment of the four sets of parents, with Todd as a surrogate, to the neighborhood. More generally, by sharing these pleasant stories, the participants in the conversation strengthened their own social bonds (Dunbar, 1996) and reinforced a shared understanding of the neighborhood as a friendly, safe, and stable environment.

**Building and maintaining mutual commitment.** The stories, metaphors, and occasional bits of teasing all served to establish, attest, and maintain the mutual understanding that the sociability and mutual caring described in various ways. The childless members of the group used affectionate stories about watching the children, and occasional teasing of Todd for his apparent ‘over-protectiveness,’ to establish that children are welcomed and valued, and to reinforce the commitment of the families on the block, as a way of maintaining the values of sociability and mutual stability. Talk

about the annual block party (in which the street is closed off for the afternoon and evening while neighbors gather to share food and drink), a metonymic reification of ‘*The Block*’ as a special place, and the recounting of other conversations about the neighborhood all reinforced the shared vision of ‘*The Block*’ as a community of mutual caring and ‘*watchfulness*.’ It appears that these metaphorical and metonymic themes, and to an even greater extent the stories told by various participants, fit within a conscious rhetorical strategy of accomplishing and maintaining the sociability and mutual commitment that participants recognized, early in the conversation, as the basis for the sense of safety and security they all enjoy. In brief, the web of stories, metaphors, metonyms, and good-natured teasing was constructed collaboratively as a strategy of maintaining the stability and cohesion of this neighborhood as a mutually protective social unit in the face of change – both the change of generations within the neighborhood and the larger-scale changes in the surrounding city. Some of this may be evident in the informative ‘*content*’ of the discourse<sup>13</sup>, but it is much more evident in the emotional and perceptual dimensions of the stories, metaphors, and teasing that dominated the conversation.

### **The role of non-propositional talk in discourse about social transformation**

At each level – societal, community, and individual – change requires adjustments to what is known and believed, to ‘knowledge.’ Part of this knowledge takes a paradigmatic or propositional form, e.g. ‘the difficulties experienced by many African-Americans can be traced to the history of slavery and ante-bellum segregation,’ ‘if the Labour Party engages in intra-party feuding we will lose the election,’ ‘effective

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<sup>13</sup> One example of propositional content came late in the conversation when one of the participants explicitly cited Jane Jacobs (1961) in support of claims about the importance of a street-centered social life.

communication with the public and with policy-makers is necessary in order to maintain continued funding for science,' and 'casual socializing with neighbors helps maintain mutual watchfulness and contributes to safety from crime.' But much of the knowledge takes the form of stories about the past, about how things are done in the present, and about hopes and plans for the future. Much of it takes the form of imaginative re-creation of events and experiences, stimulated by repetition of metaphors and stories. And much of it takes the form of inter-personal relationships, a sense of who can and cannot be trusted, feelings of mutual enjoyment, commitment and obligation.

I have shown how this *non*-propositional basis for dealing with change is constructed, not through arguments, facts, and reasoning but through metaphors, stories and humor. Obama repeated the old *dividing* stories and metaphors in a way that blended them into new *uniting* stories and metaphors. Blair repeated Biblical stories and blended them with the more particular stories of his years as Prime Minister, then contrasted the blend with a comic story of domestic altercation to highlight the importance and the possibility of unity. The neighbors repeated shared stories of everyday interactions in their neighborhood in the new context of a discussion about public safety as a way of giving new meaning to their sociability and reinforcing their mutual commitment to the community. In each case, understanding the discursive processes and their relationship to the problems and opportunities associated with social change requires attention, not merely to the propositional content of the language, but also to the imagined or simulated experience of perceptions and emotions associated with the metaphors, stories, word-play and teasing.

Conversely, focusing on the propositional ‘content’ and ignoring the simulations (schemas, perceptions, emotions, etc.) and semantic links to other knowledge that are activated by strongly expressive language can contribute to overly simplistic analysis of public discourse. An example occurs in Jensen’s account of the firing of comedian Bill Maher because of comments made shortly after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center. In response to a statement in which President Bush called the attackers ‘cowards,’ Maher said ‘We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it’s not cowardly’. According to Jensen’s analysis, Maher was the victim of ‘corporate censorship’ resulting from the withdrawal of sponsorship, apparently at least partly in response to ‘vaguely menacing’ statements by White House press secretary Ari Fleischer.

Considering only the propositional content, Bush’s statement does seem preposterous, and Maher’s remarks seem reasonable. Holding oneself back from personal danger is indeed closer to the conventional definition of ‘cowardly’ than putting oneself in personal danger – even when the intent in the latter case is manifestly both homicidal and suicidal. Bush’s use of the word in this context is contradicted by the ‘dictionary definition’ of *cowardice*, and Maher’s remarks were consistent with that definition. But when the schemas and emotions activated by the words and phrases are taken into account, things get more complicated. The context, a nation and in particular the families of thousands of victims who were still in the early stages of grieving, must also be considered: The ideas and emotions associated with President Bush’s words (however ineptly chosen) were quite consistent with the emotional response to an

unprovoked attack on non-combatants engaged in routine daily activities. As such, Bush's words were intended to be, and were in fact comforting not merely to the families of the victims but also to the millions of others who shared their shock and grief.

Conversely the ideas and emotions associated with Maher's words (however *logically* apt) implied *praise* for the attackers and *censure* of the victims. At the time they were spoken, they were like pouring salt in raw wounds. Contrary to the implications of Jensen's analysis, it was not merely the White House Press Secretary and the 'Corporate Fat Cats' who controlled ABC's advertising revenues who were offended. Maher's comments were not 'politically incorrect' so much as they were emotionally insensitive. It may be possible to construct an argument that this incident exemplifies corporate censorship, but to be convincing, it would be necessary to consider how the associated ideas and emotions interacted with the full context. By focusing on the propositional definition of 'cowardly' and ignoring the associated ideas, images, and emotions activated by the uses of the word in this particular context, Jensen's analysis misses an important part of the underlying dynamic.

On the other hand, analysis of associated ideas, images, and emotions supports other aspects of Jensen's analysis. Jensen quotes then White House press secretary Ari Fleischer's 'cautionary and vaguely menacing statement: "they're reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that.'" Here, the *propositional* content does not seem particularly menacing – it is literally true that a time of mourning is *not* the time for praising the attackers. Fleischer's remarks, however, have the potential to activate schemas of 'secret police' eavesdroppers, 'informers,' and 'enemies lists' dating back to the Cold War and



the Nixon Presidency, and even beyond to 1950s “Red-baiting.” It is these associated simulations and schemas, not the propositional content, that render Fleischer’s remarks menacing.

It is manifestly true that corporate power is often used to censor views that are either politically unpopular or merely damaging to corporate interests, and censorship may have been a factor here – it certainly seems evident that Bush was already laying the propaganda groundwork for his subsequent war-making and for his outrageous expansion of Presidential power. But there is also a case to be made that Maher’s unfeeling remarks, *at the time when he made them*, fit within the widely-accepted “shouting fire in a crowded theater” and “fighting words” exceptions to the principle of free speech. Considering the context and the simulations as well as the propositional content of Maher’s remarks, the case can be made that Maher deserved censure for the emotional and relational effects of his comments and that his firing from ABC was a reasonable response to his emotional insensitivity. In brief, a complete account of an incident of this sort must include attention to the perceptual simulations, the associated ideas, images, and emotions, as well as to the propositional content of what is actually written or spoken, and in many cases the perceptual simulations may be by far the more important.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued for attention to the perceptual and imaginative, the emotional and relational implications of language as well as to the paradigmatic or propositional “content” of discourse related to social change, and for attention to change at the level of individual relationships and small-scale communities as well as at the level of nations and large-scale cultures. I have shown how attention to the non-propositional aspects of

language can be at least as revealing as attention to the propositional aspects. Patterns of metaphor use and transformation and patterns of story-telling and transformation are particularly revealing, as is the playful or humorous distortion of familiar metaphors and stories. The transformation and transmission of *ideas* (in propositional form) and the presentation of paradigmatic evidence in well-structured logical arguments is of undoubted importance, but I have argued that the building and reinforcement of relationships and interpersonal commitments through language use is of no less importance. Understanding processes of social transformation at any level requires attention to these interpersonal and relational aspects of society, which in turn require attention to the nuances of language in discourse, both the grand discourse of politicians and thinkers and the casual conversations of ordinary people as they go about their lives.

Politicians are frequently criticized for relying on stories and metaphors instead of paradigmatic reasoning and “well-formed arguments.” It is evident from recent press reports of the “moot court” style debates in Obama’s cabinet meetings that he is perfectly capable of this style of discourse. But it also seems quite evident that, had he addressed the American voters in that vein on March 18, 2008, with a list of well-formed arguments demonstrating the legitimate basis for Jeremiah Wright’s anger toward the United States government and the rightness of his own loyalty to Reverend Wright, he would have lost the election, and the transformations brought about by his election would have been deferred, possibly for another decade or longer. What I hope to have shown in this essay is that metaphors and stories and the perceptual simulations and emotions they activate, the changes in shared memories they bring about, have an important part in the processes of social and cultural transformation – and in our understanding of those processes.

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