'TWO LOAVES WHERE THERE SEEMS TO BE ONE': METAPHORS WE TEACH BY

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> I love metaphor. It provides two loaves where there seems to be one. Sometimes it throws in a load of fish. (Bernard Malamud 1975, Interview in *Paris Review* (Spring); cited in Crystal & Crystal 2000: 246)

1. Backdrop

Definitions of metaphor have been many and varied over the years, to be sure, and it is not my place to investigate these here. The story I tell is based on a rather general and commonsensical account of the concept, but it does seem to be the one place where researchers and theorists, even those of very different 'flavours', reach agreement (cf. Cameron 1999: 3). When people use metaphor, they refer to one domain by using language expressions that are normally associated with some other domain. This explanation of metaphor has strayed little from Aristotle's original account. As he put it back in the 4th century BC: '[…] a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars' (Aristotle *Poetics* Chapter 22, page 2335; translated by I. Bywater). As is clear from his various descriptions of metaphor in both *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle was definitely of the opinion that people will learn and grasp something far better when they experience it through a good metaphor. 'It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh' (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* Book 3: 10, page 2250; translated by W. Rhys Roberts). I

will be returning to Aristotle's writings on metaphor many times in this piece. (I do not wish to be accused of trampling on the footprints of Aristotle in the linguist's garden! Cf. Allan 2007 on the failure of modern-day linguistics to acknowledge Aristotle's contribution.)

Metaphor always involves the comparison of two items where there exists some sort of relationship. If this sounds vague, it is deliberately so, for there are many different kinds of relationships that can hold between these items. It is a matter of analogy. A straightforward example might be this. Let's say we call someone a *worm.* This sort of comparison takes salient characteristics from folk concepts about the appearance and the behaviour of the creature and these are then attributed to that person. *A worm* is 'someone sleazy, slimy, someone who crawls, someone who is sycophantic'. We might want to convey a picture of a person who is totally loathsome in manner and character. Of course, taken literally, the statement is false. This person is not actually 'a worm'. But we are claiming that there is a semantic connection between this person (the figurative meaning) and a worm (the literal meaning) — all the colour and the expressive force of this insult derive from this relationship. Clearly, what metaphor does so well is to draw attention to certain features, while at the same time, of course, obscuring others (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1981: Ch. 21). Such analogies as this one are taken from the real world and when these analogies are conspicuous, then they are dubbed a metaphor. To say 'he's a worm' quite obviously applies a term from the domain of animal behaviour to the domain of human behaviour.

Aristotle was probably the first to point to the ubiquity of metaphor. He wrote:

> In the language of prose, besides the regular and proper terms for things, metaphorical terms only can be used with advantage. This we gather from the fact that these two classes of terms, the proper or regular and the metaphorical — these and no others — are used by everybody in conversation. (Aristotle *Rhetoric* Book 3: 2, page 2240; translated by W. Rhys Roberts).

Our language is firmly founded in the world of our perceptions and conceptions, and as soon as we open our mouths or put pen to paper we produce metaphors. But most of them are conventionalized — they are automatic. As Lakoff and Johnson (1991: 139) express it, these are 'metaphors that structure the ordinary conceptual system of our culture, which is reflected in our everyday language'. For example, in English (like so many other languages) expressions

to do with seeing, hearing and touching often develop to become terms of understanding; for example, *I see* and *I hear you* for 'I understand (you)' or *He finally grasped it* for 'He finally understood'. In these cases we are no longer conscious of the metaphorical links. Time has pushed them below the level of consciousness. Often the imagery is well and truly buried, as in a verb like *to comprehend*. It too comes from something that means 'to grasp, seize' but this is a metaphor from long ago, and one that has been borrowed from Latin. Most of what we talk about, it seems, is in terms of something else. Scratch the surface of many expressions and you will find a dried-out metaphor of this nature.

Over the years Keith Allan and I have worked on linguistic taboos (Allan and Burridge 1991, 2006). Taboos will always generate a rich exuberance of metaphorical language and the imagery here often falls well outside the conceptual system of the conventional metaphor. It is anything but routine and can involve language as diverse as street slang through to the poetic diction we normally associate with elevated literature. What our work has highlighted is the creativity and inventiveness of ordinary language users, not in the usual linguistic sense of creativity (in other words, the ability of language users to generate novel structures), but the poetic inventiveness of ordinary people in the figures they create to construct euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions. The expressions range from the exquisitely lyrical to the downright crass — many demonstrate an expressiveness and poetic ingenuity worthy of William Shakespeare. Clearly, metaphor, even marvelous metaphor, is not simply the stuff of great literature. Just look at current wine terminology that draws on figures like *big, full, deep, even, thick, flat* and *small.* This is the sort of bold imagery of poetry and fiction. Metaphor pervades our whole language and is undoubtedly one of the most significant forces behind linguistic change. We are constantly adapting familiar structures from our experiences to new purposes in our language. Whether we are inventing names for new concepts, adding to the names of old concepts, insulting someone, even creating new grammar, metaphor is very often behind it all.

2. Metaphors at work

Metaphor, moreover, gives style clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* Book 3: 2, page 2240; translated by W. Rhys Roberts).

In his work Aristotle emphasized the ability of metaphors to bring to mind new aspects of the world and new ways of understanding reality. He made much of the instructive value of metaphors through vividness and novelty of expression:

> Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more. His mind seems to say, 'Yes, to be sure; I never thought of that' (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* Book 3: 11, page 2253; translated by W. Rhys Roberts).

Clearly, great opportunities can be made of this aspect of metaphor in the classroom. Analogies that are taken from the real world — situations and concepts that are familiar to students — help them to cope with situations and concepts that are new and alien to them, and (with the right metaphor) in a way that is enjoyable and user-friendly.

Let me explain how it was that I first became aware of the usefulness of metaphors in the learning process. As a keen teacher of first year students, it usually fell to me to give the introductory classes on phonology. It was something I always dreaded. Beginning students of linguistics always seemed to find the concepts of the phoneme, and particularly notions of complementary and contrastive distribution, very difficult. (As a fugitive from literature, I remember doing so.) Then I discovered the metaphor that said it all. In their introduction to linguistics, Crowley et al. (1995) explained the ideas in terms of the cane toads and the cane beetles of far north Queensland. Most Australians know the story well. And those students who weren't familiar with it were interested to learn. Cane toads were introduced to Australia to wipe out the cane beetle, whose larvae were eating the roots of sugar cane and killing or stunting the plants. In 1935 more than 3000 cane toads were released into the sugar cane plantations. The plan was a failure because, like the velar nasal and the glottal glide of English, the cane toad and the cane beetle are in complementary distribution. As it turns out, these introduced cane toads stay near the ground while the beetles live in the upper stalks of cane plants. In the course of telling of this story, students acquire the concepts of complementary and contrastive distribution effortlessly and enjoyably. The ability of a novel metaphor such as this one to convey new meaning — cheerfully, clearly, and colourfully — is what makes it such a valuable pedagogical device. The toads

and beetles of far north Queensland added some theatre to the explanation of what are difficult and highly abstract phonological concepts.

As linguists I believe our task as teachers is made all the more difficult precisely because of the apparent familiar and everyday nature of the subject matter we deal with. It is after all just language. Quite simply, students feel they ought to understand and they quickly become discouraged (sometimes even hostile) when they don't. Outside the discipline of linguistics, there already exists an extensive non-technical vocabulary used by the lay public when talking about language; but unfortunately, the terminology is often too imprecise to be of real use within the discipline of linguistics. Linguists are therefore faced with having to narrow and redefine everyday terms like *sentence, word, syllable* and *grammar*, as well as add a barrage of new terms to overcome imprecision and to distinguish things that non-linguists ignore and, in consequence, ordinary language lacks terms for. The discipline of linguistics is perceived as intellectual hocus-pocus and all the more offensive because it seems to deal with an everyday domain. Metaphors help to bridge the gap. They help students see the subject matter in a new light and they stimulate discussion. Things normally invisible (all the more because they are so familiar) become visible.

In addition to the metaphors that must pervade my ordinary conversation as a matter of course, I have in my discussions about language made conscious use of a number of different metaphors over the years. Sometimes they appear singly; for example, allophones as slices of cake, euphemisms as fig leaves (an image I borrowed from Hugh Rawson 1981), language as an intricate folded rose (to explain its layers of complexity), and, of course the usual suspects such as language as a game of chess (from Saussure 1960). In fact, anyone doubting the value of metaphor in education should consider that a number of years ago my own department changed the name of its first year unit from 'Language in Australian Society' to 'The Language Game: Why do we speak the way we do?'. This hospitable metaphor of language as a game (which runs through the entire unit) has proved extremely successful in facilitating students' understanding of language. We have since doubled our enrolments.

Mostly I find myself making use of what is sometimes called the megametaphor, or metaphoric theme (thanks to Ludmilla A'Beckett for introducing this concept to me). For example, in 1991 Jean Mulder and I wrote a textbook on English 'Downunder'. This was intended as a first year linguistics textbook based upon English in New Zealand and in Australia. We wanted to call it 'Feasting on English'. All examples were culled from

culinary texts — cooking books throughout the centuries, food and wine magazines, books about food, health, diet and even etiquette. As we stated in the introduction, we couldn't imagine a more pleasant way of grappling with the English language than over knives, forks and a bottle of good wine. The metaphor of food provided the book with a nice consistency. Moreover, by drawing on everyday experiences, we could bring English alive and encourage the students to wallow in the day-to-day language that is all around them — everything from the instructions on the back of a cereal packet to the language of hangover cures. This was especially important for the texts from earlier periods of English. We wanted to show that speakers and writers of the past were part of a living, breathing speech community and that the language they spoke and wrote is the language we speak and write today. A 10th century recipe for roasted swan, free from any literary ambition and stylization, brings the speakers and their language alive. But most useful was also the convenience of the occasional food analogy to help shed light on a difficult linguistic concept. I've always liked Jespersen's (1922) image of hypotactic sentences as Chinese boxes — but brown onions aren't bad either.

Work with Keith Allan on euphemism and taboo has also drawn constantly on a megametaphor, in this case that of language as shield and weapon. To speak euphemistically is to use language like a shield against the feared, the disliked, the unpleasant. Euphemisms can be used to upgrade (as a shield against scorn); they are used deceptively to conceal unpleasant aspects (as a shield against anger); and they are used to display in-group identity (as a shield against the intrusion of out-groupers). Conversely, to speak dysphemistically is to use language as a weapon against those things and people that frustrate and annoy us, and whom we disapprove of, despise, dislike or plain hate. As we argued, it is not for nothing that there are laws of libel and that repressive regimes resort to censorship: language is sometimes the only weapon against brute force. Through these experiences it became obvious to me just how insightful these elaborate metaphorical themes can be — sometimes in ways not even anticipated by the metaphor-maker.

2.1 Language as a garden
   Ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
   That grows to seed; (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [I.ii])

Recently, I have been having some fun playing with the links between gardens and language. I initially arrived at this gardening metaphor, when I was trying to

find an image that would unite all of the little linguistic pieces I'd written over the years for radio. These pieces were generated largely from talkback calls — observations on language and queries about language usage. Very often of course they involved complaints by callers about the language of others. (We are all of us born with a keen nose for the ill-chosen word and the grammatical error of our fellow speakers!) What united these pieces was the concern that people showed for the well-being of their language. This brought to mind a picture of English as some sort of garden that, if not carefully and constantly tended, would become unruly and overgrown. Shakespeare expressed it far more eloquently. Or as one of the passionate supporters of the apostrophe once put it to me in a grumpy letter (after I had suggested that English could well survive without the services of possessive apostrophe): 'We shall have no formal structure of our language: it will become unteachable, unintelligible, and eventually, useless as an accurate means of communication'.

The garden metaphor helped me to organize my experiences of talkback radio. Clearly, what was involved here was prescription, but gardening provided a more gentle and more positive image; besides, as Deborah Cameron (1998) has claimed, the behaviour of speakers here is more complex and diverse than the dogmatic labels 'prescription' and 'purism' imply. She opts for the expression 'verbal hygiene' for exactly this reason. Like her verbal hygienists, language 'gardeners' can be found in all sorts of associations. They are the people found in language groups formed to promote causes as diverse as Plain English, simplified spelling, Esperanto, Klingon, assertiveness and effective communication — even something as esoteric as the abolition of aberrant apostrophes (such as *Canva's Hat's*) and the preservation of Old English strong verbs (such as *clomb* for the past of *climb*). But equally gardeners are those folk who simply enjoy looking things up in dictionaries and usage books, who spend time thinking and talking about language, and who like punning and playing Scrabble or Balderdash. Like Cameron, I felt that a sense of linguistic values makes verbal hygiene part of every speaker's linguistic competence. We are all closet language gardeners of some sort. But it was also the sense of enjoyment that I wanted to get across, for clearly there is a tremendous amount of pleasure to be had pottering about in the garden — edging, staking, cutting back, keeping bugs at bay. Why else would someone bother to spend the time calculating that *foolish* could be spelt 613, 975 different ways?

The garden is also an image that nicely caters for the arsenal of prescriptive texts (dictionaries, style guides, usage books, grammars) that give standard

languages like English much of its muscle. These texts are the conservatories, the greenhouses and the hothouses that nurture our language, often artificially keeping alive features that have long perished in ordinary usage. It is in these linguistic nurseries that some people work to protect and cherish endangered constructions, words, meanings and pronunciations. The neat lists and beautifully spun paradigms inside the dictionary and handbook provide the glasshouse counterpart to the outside 'wild garden'.

So where do linguists fit into this image of the garden? As they themselves will point out in any introductory lecture on linguistics, linguists study language, in the same way that botanists study plants and zoologists research the physiology, anatomy and behaviour of animals. And just as biologists cannot denigrate certain species in the plant world that the wider community views as weeds, neither can linguists disparage native speakers for, say, dropping an *l* in *vulnerable* or condemn as a 'linguistic atrocity' an expression such as *youse*. Yet for those in the wider community there is usually a very clear distinction between the unwanted plants in the garden and those that should be encouraged to survive. Accordingly, they view linguists as the seasoned gardeners whose task is precisely to advise on what should be trimmed, removed or promoted in the garden — linguists control the pests, build the hothouses and perform the topiary. The gulf to be bridged between these two camps is considerable.

The associated metaphor of the weed worked better than I anticipated, as I realized when I started to visit serious tomes on horticulture. Weed experts I gather have great difficulty coming up with a scientific account of the term *weed*. Even in technical works on weed management I encountered definitions such as: 'a plant growing where we do not want it'; 'a plant whose virtues are yet to be discovered', 'a plant growing out of place', 'a plant that you do not want'; 'a plant you hate'. More precise definitions, apparently, are impossible — in fact not practicable. The difficulty is that weeds are context specific. It depends entirely on location and on time whether something is classified as a weed or not. And so it is with the weeds in our language. One speaker's noxious weed can be another's garden ornamental. A linguistic weed today can be a cherished garden contributor tomorrow. This is what I wanted readers to focus on and acknowledge. Whether they are in gardens or in languages, weeds are totally centred around human value judgements.

And there is another aspect to weeds — they are highly successful. Weeds, as I learned, share certain biological features that enable them to prosper.

They have a prolific seed production and effective seed dispersal mechanisms, they spread by rhizomes and tubers which means they can regenerate from the smallest of fragments and they are often unpalatable to browsers. In short, they are very hard to kill. So why, within one language system, do some 'weeds' end up flourishing while others eventually whither? Language change is typically marked by rivalry between different forms. So what are the capabilities that enable one feature to be triumphant and spread through the language? Hundreds of slang expressions are created by speakers each year. Most fall by the wayside but some succeed — why? Pronunciations with initial [ʃ] in *sue* and *suitor* were denounced in the 17th century as 'barbarous'. They were eventually eradicated. So how come the pronunciations for *sugar* and *sure* snuck through the weed controls? And what enables certain linguistic weeds to extend their perimeters beyond one social group to spread to others? One of the challenges confronting linguists is to determine the conditions that allow linguistic features to prosper in a particular language at a particular time. The weed metaphor provided the nice opportunity for discussing what has come to be known in linguistics as the 'actuation problem' (Weinreich et al. 1968: 102).

Clearly, there are truly noxious plants out there in weed flora that inflict (sometimes irreversible) damage on the landscapes they infest. Does this pernicious behaviour of the weed also fit in with our experience of language? What perhaps springs to mind in this instance are those aspects that have to do with manipulation through advertising and propaganda, the influences of language on our thinking and behaviour, linguistic discrimination and, in particular, official obfuscation and the maintenance of power — the features of language use that Dwight Bolinger fought so hard to expose in his writings (for example, Bolinger 1980). The weed metaphor hopefully gave new meaning to these aspects of our language, and without the hysteria of some recent popular accounts such as those by Watson (for example, Watson 2003). It is true, advertisers and politicians twist and warp language, sometimes outrageously, to sell their products or to persuade their audiences. But this is what we all do — bend language for our own ends. The words and constructions we chose always hint, suggest, and insinuate. They never simply ditto reality. By its very nature, language has spin. Besides, there are many occasions where we don't want precise language, or even honest language, for that matter. We are expected to turn a tactful blind eye, perhaps, or tell a white lie. Most of the time we are polite, whatever we are feeling deep down. Without these weedy

tendencies social interaction would soon grind to a halt. Speech communities are complex things and language must be able to reflect a vast range of social behaviour. Get rid of the weeds and the soil becomes impoverished. To steal a phrase from Mary Ellis' book on herbs, I wanted to get across the idea of the 'virtuous weed'.

Metaphors that come to us fresh can themselves create aspects of reality and suggest new methods of understanding. As hinted at earlier, my initial intention was that this metaphor would help to overcome the gap between the general public and linguistics. I'm not sure whether or not it succeeded in the end, but it certainly has helped me to better understand the gap. Linguists can argue till they're blue in the face that all constructions are equally good and that change and variation are natural and inevitable features of any thriving language — it just so happens most others disagree. The feeling between the two camps is one of mutual distrust; linguistic experts fail to address lay concerns and lay activists show no interest in heeding linguists. In 1992 a newspaper article appeared which vividly conveyed the views of many in the wider community towards professional linguists: Laurence Urdang, editor of *Verbatim*, described linguists as 'categorically the dullest people on the face of the earth; ... rather than trying to present and explain information, they seem to be going in the opposite direction. They try to shield people from knowing anything useful about the language' (Burridge 2005: 162-64). Linguists find popular perceptions of language ill-informed and narrow-minded. The wider community feels let down.

It was after I read the great gardening debates of the 18th and 19th centuries that I started to see this divide in a different light. Gardeners during this time apparently fell into two camps over the question of what constituted a 'proper garden'. Was it a work of nature or was it a work of art? Suddenly it became obvious why I had such trouble getting my ideas across to talkback callers. For linguists, language is a natural (even if social) phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts and can be studied objectively. This stance is resoundingly rejected by others in the wider community for whom language is an art form, something to be cherished, revered and preserved. Understandably, they reject the neutral position of the linguistics profession. Other people had pointed out this difference before (Bolinger 1980, for example), but it took these gardening books for me to see it and properly understand it.

Gardens and standard languages have much in common. Both are human constructions and they share two fundamental characteristics. They are

restricted by boundaries and they also cultivated. It is clear too that speakers of English believe in a standard language. They believe in, if not the existence, then the possibility of a totally regular and homogenous language system. Linguists have to realize just how powerful these beliefs are (sociolinguists probably have for some time). Non-linguists must also realize that we need to mess with the cherished standard if we are to develop a better and more constructive public discourse on language. To create a standard language or to build a garden is to enter into a partnership with natural processes. Languages and gardens are never finished products

3. In conclusion

Lakoff and Johnson (1981: 3) go as far as claiming that the ordinary conceptual system of human beings is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. If they are right and all thinking is metaphorical, then it stands to reason that metaphors will be a good way to help us think. I spent much of this piece focusing on one example of a metaphorical theme that has been formed by a group of individual but coherent metaphors to do with gardening. Clearly, there is an advantage to metaphorical themes such as this, to organize and to draw together concepts in a coherent, efficient and (hopefully) pleasing fashion. Through *gardens, cherished flowers, weeds, hybrids, exotics, mulch, hothouses, fertilizers,* and *blooming (English)* I found a way to unite what initially seemed a disparate bunch of articles about language. The key metaphor (language is a garden) ended up sprouting an array of associated metaphors that I hoped were informative and memorable. But it also took me down paths I had not foreseen. When such themes activate other metaphors in this way, they help to unfold a topic and also to draw attention to different aspects of the topic. This can be in ways not even anticipated by the creator of the metaphor.

   I don't research how metaphors work and I cannot provide evidence from learning outcomes to support the notion that metaphors are valuable pedagogical tools (though see Cortazzi and Jin 1999, who make a fairly convincing case that metaphors can raise language awareness). I can only go by what I have observed in the classroom and from feedback I have received in the way of phone calls and emails from radio listeners. Literal language might be more precise and less ambiguous, as critics of metaphor have argued, but it is metaphorical language (particularly, the non common-or-garden

variety) that creates new insights and new exciting means of comprehending reality. Metaphors highlight reality and also generate aspects of reality that go beyond literal language. Metaphors offer two loaves where there seems to be one — they might even throw in a fish.

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