

***“I See the Urgent Needs of Children”:  
A Dialogue With the “Firefighter of Charity Work”***

Shuk Ling Cheng, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This paper explores the career journey of an award-winning founder of a charity. The interview data comprised a Zoom recording, which was auto-converted into verbatim transcript, and then analyzed using social-cultural discourse analysis with a focus on the use of descriptive metaphors by the speaker. The first part of interview consisted of an informative public speaking by the speaker whose impetus in the narrative accentuated his spiritual calling to establish a charity that sponsored left-behind children with HIV AIDS positive whilst fighting social stigma. Metaphors were used, particularly when the speaker referred himself as “a firefighter trying to put the fire out” seeing the urgent needs of underprivileged children in rural areas of China. The second part of the interview consisted of dialogues between the speaker and audience, in which the speaker gave reasons for the changes in his career journey from being an investment banker to the founder of charity. The figurative speech of a “wagon” depicted his identity struggle as a result of “jumping off from investment banking wagon”. The transformation of the speaker’s self-discovery associated with career change could be observed from the analysis.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Metaphor, Interview Verbatim Transcript

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

Natural language is dynamic and complex, sometimes people write and speak using metaphors, which is to use visual symbolism that evoke mental images. Aristotle explained that metaphor “gives style, clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can” (Aristotle, (n.d.), p. 141). His view of metaphor as “decorations of human speech acts” has lasted for centuries. In recent decades, scholars have started to perceive metaphors as the medium of meaning making, which helps a speaker to better encode messages to an audience. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, a linguist and philosopher, wrote *Metaphors We Live By*, which is considered to be the most extensive theoretical exploration of metaphor to date (Lakoff, G., Johnson, M., 1980) It was pointed out that people use metaphors not only to make spoken discourse more interesting, but that metaphors actually structure people’s perceptions and understandings of the world.

Metaphors are considered as “figures of speech used to compare one thing to another, signal more complex meaning making and thus metaphor analysis can be useful as a means of qualitative data analysis.” (Redden, S. M., 2017) The use of metaphors in spoken discourse is viewed as “mechanisms that are integrated in how people think, act, and communicate”, as well as “an important avenue for researchers interested in understanding why people communicate as they do” (Redden, S. M., 2017).

In this qualitative case study, we look into the spoken discourse of an award-winning founder of charity. The speaker used quite a number of metaphors to depict his career journey: he “saw the urgency” of helpless children with HIV in rural area of China, which was described as “seeing a fire”; he then “jumped off from the investment banking wagon” to become a founder of charity, meaning that he quitted his job at investment bank in Wall Street all of a sudden. The guest speaker possesses a postgraduate degree of Harvard University, and has over 14 years of work experience in the field of investment banking. He then quit his job and founded an award-winning charity, aiming at helping HIV AIDS positive children in rural area in mainland China. These kids were born with HIV AIDS due to congenital issues, they faced the issues of social stigma, discrimination, poverty, as well as the lack of financial support for education.

The speaker once visited the rural area in mainland China and was shocked to see a number of helpless children, he then founded a charity targeting this group of children. Scholarships and financial assistance were supplied for these children to fulfil their education needs, thousands of these beneficiaries had the chance to receive formal education at public schools and even admitted to top universities later on. Apart from education, they also offer vocational training for these children to learn different skills such as baking, whilst social enterprises (e.g. bakery) were established to provide job opportunity for trainees.

The speaker shared his story under an impromptu context, with a free-thinking atmosphere and within a limited time frame. It is therefore interesting to notice that the speaker unconsciously attempted to use metaphor as a “short hand” to express and substitute with certain ideas. With the application of metaphor analysis, the speaker’s expressions, in which images were used to convey the ultimate meaning of his speech acts, can thus be interpreted systematically. The implications of metaphor analysis can potentially help public speakers to understand and refine verbal communication strategies.

## Literature Review

Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in research on language and discourse. A number of metaphorical discourse analysis also spanned across disciplinary borders. For example, metaphor analysis on discourse has been applied to understand organizational change, evaluate pedagogical strategies and learning outcomes, understand divorce, critique public speech, and assess leadership styles, to name but a few.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) first introduced Conceptual Metaphor theory, which suggested that the essence of metaphor is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”. Metaphor is cross-domain mapping from the source domain to target domain, with the former typically referring to abstract and intangible concepts and the latter to concrete and tangible ones. For example, the saying of “Time is Money” is a metaphor, in which the intangible concept of “time” comprises the target domain and tangible concept of “money” is the source domain. (Guo, S., 2013) Lakoff and Turner (1989) stated that we “constantly rely on metaphors in daily speech acts, unconsciously, and automatically”. It is so much part of us that it cannot be easily resisted, to a large extent that it is “barely even noticed”.

## Objectives

1. To examine and interpret the layers of meaning of metaphors used by the speaker
2. To deduce the potential reasons for using different themes of metaphors

## Methodology

In gathering qualitative data via interviews, researchers might use a “forced metaphor approach” (Tracy, 2010) which asks people to assign metaphors to their experiences. For instance, educational researchers could ask students to describe their time in college using metaphors. They may even offer a list of metaphors and let subjects to choose from the limited range of words.

Many scholars, however, consider an idiographic approach to metaphor analysis to be the most convincing method. Redden, S. M. (2017) has pointed out that “less scholarly work used an emergent, inductive way of assessing meaning making from metaphors found organically in data”, and hence viewed inductive based qualitative research regarding metaphors is an opportunity for exploration. In this qualitative study, an idiographic approach to metaphor analysis is adopted to examine the verbatim transcript of the speaker’s sharing on Zoom. The guest speaker was invited to an undergraduate business class to give a sharing for a group of undergraduate students via Zoom. The sharing lasted for approximately an hour, it consisted of two sessions: the first part was a solo talk by the speaker, in which the speaker shared his story of career change in the form of “impromptu” (without the assistance of script or PowerPoint slides); the second part involved Q&A session, in which students were free to ask questions for the guest speaker.

In the metaphor analysis, four major themes of metaphors were identified and categorized:

1. **“Problem” Metaphor**
2. **“Solution” Metaphor**
3. **“Family” Metaphor**
4. **“Object” Metaphor**

## Findings and Discussion

The numbers of different themes of metaphor found in the verbatim transcript are as follows:

1. “Problem” Metaphors: 9
2. “Solution” Metaphors: 6
3. “Family” Metaphors: 3
4. “Object” Metaphors: 3

### “Problem” Metaphors

“I saw *a fire*. This is very urgent.”

“There were older students who are working we were able to introduce them to better for better job. They have *broken windows*, we were able to fix the broken window, so they have a warm winter.”

“It is much more than just giving them money. We have to empower them, inspire them so that they can live out of *the shadow* of AIDS, and become more self esteem.”

“So when I started that foundation, I decided to have no pre-set quota, then actually have *driven my finance director crazy*.”

“The society that the general public, have seen that Oh, even the Marriott supports AIDS work is a tremendous value, and I think HIV AIDS now is just like *leprosy*.”

“It would be wonderful if a rehab, *a drug rehab centre* can hire a lot of former *drug addicts* who have able to successfully get rid of the *drug addiction* to come back to work for the rehab centre it gives a lot of trust and tremendous confidence.”

“The same thing can go by with former *prison inmates*.”

### “Solution” Metaphors

“They have broken windows, we were able to *fix the broken window*, so they have a *warm winter*.”

“So we have also a student who also went to very prestigious schools, including the United world college to the left. In Hong Kong, there's a united world college to, which is called the *leap potion*.”

“I *get off from my investment banking bus or investment banking wagon*, and then try to *put out a fire as a firefighter*, because when the fire is put out, I can always jump back on the investment banking random and, you know, continue my job.”

“That's why I care a lot about the voice of the alumni and I try to put in an important position so that they can *voice out their feelings* and the future direction of the foundation.”

### “Family” Metaphors

“They have become our *big brothers and big sisters* to the villages to inspire the younger children in the village to become our Goodwill Ambassador.”

“So, all the university students will become a *Big Brothers Big Sisters*, also would have to teach summer school in the villages, is a free program.”

“The alumni network is an important part of our program. And they are the *guardian* of the foundation too.”

### “Object” Metaphors

“In Chinese saying there is a saying that Oh, there's a *golden villa* in education.”

“So, we have a very *tightly knit network*. As I said, we have 5000 students who have already graduated from university.”

“So, can this really be replicated. I think so. So, about three years ago we have evolved, because we called our HIV family students *starfish*.”

Given that it was an “impromptu” speech act (without the assistance of script or PowerPoint slides) of the guest, he was unaware of the constant use of metaphor throughout the sharing. The unconscious use of metaphors can be seen as a form of “shorthand” to help the speaker explain the details of his charity-founding story for the audience within a short period of time (approximately an hour). The additional layer of meaning rooted in the sharing can be interpreted and perceived as the number of “solutions”, the support of “family”, and the availability of positive “objects” can cast out the “problems” encountered by HIV AIDS positive children, including social stigma, poverty and the lack of financial support for education. This implicitly reflects that the speaker is optimistic towards the charity work as a helping hand for the HIV AIDS positive children.

## Conclusions

In this case study, one of the reasons for using metaphors in verbal behaviour can be determined as a form of “shorthand” to help audience effectively understand speaker’s expressions. Zinken, J. (2007) considered the use of metaphors as “an attempt to bridge the gap between analogies and verbal behaviour”, which can help listener(s) better comprehend the expressions of a speaker. On the other hand, Tannen, D., (2007) proposed that the use of metaphor can “create rapport between the speaker and audience”. The use of metaphor in speaker’s sharing can be seen as creating a connection with the audience. Redden, S. M. (2017) has put forward that colloquial meanings vary widely based on cultural context. It is therefore crucial to also consider the embedded cultural meaning of metaphors used by the speaker.

Context has a texture-like property which the linguistic sub-discipline of lexical semantics will shed light on the texture of contexts using a rule-based calculation of word proximity and correlations of words in the text. For future research directions, it is suggested to look into the conditions under which metaphor usage changes in particular contexts with the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as Atlas.Ti, it can produce powerful interactive visualization amenable to further human-researcher interpretations because the meaning hence becomes emergent from the text itself and not predetermined with selective analysis of the researchers. In other words, verbatim script on the topic, after subject to software analysis can reveal further high-level concepts displayed in immersive, interactive visualizations and manifested in data exports, delivering the key ideas and actionable insights that are needed for synthesis and researcher’s evaluation.

## Acknowledgements

My greatest gratitude to Dr. Andrew Chan, who guided me on a journey of understanding and conducting discourse analysis.

## References

- Aristotle (n.d.). *Rhetoric* (W. Rhys Roberts, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://www.bocc.ubi.pt/pag/Aristotle-rhetoric.pdf>
- Guo, S. (2013). Metaphor studies from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis: A case study of business acquisition. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.3.475-481>
- Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Malvini Redden, S., Tracy, S. J., & Shafer, M. (2013). A metaphor analysis of recovering substance abusers' sensemaking of medication-assisted treatment. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23, 951–962. doi:10.1177/1049732313487802
- Redden, S. M. (2017). Metaphor analysis. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0154>
- Tannen, D. (2007). *Imaging Worlds: Imagery and Detail in Conversation and Other Genres*. In *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse* (pp. 133–160). essay, Cambridge University Press.
- Zinken, J. (2007). Discourse metaphors: The link between Figurative language and habitual analogies. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 18(3). <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog.2007.024>

**Contact email:** [sl.cheng@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:sl.cheng@cityu.edu.hk)