

## Attending to Metaphor in Counselling

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**Abstract**—The study of Metaphor has evolved from a purely rhetoric and semantic approach to a more functional realm related to language, thoughts and actions. Research into metaphor has travelled from literature and aesthetics into social sciences.

This is a qualitative research designed to investigate how metaphor, initiated by the clients, is used in a counselling setting and how metaphors promote behavioural changes. The sampling includes 68 participants who were doing counselling practicum training. Observations and discourse analysis methods were employed. Discovery of themes followed the constant comparison approach developed by Strauss and Cobin.

The findings showed that metaphors reveal the contextualized culture of the clients, which, in this study, is contemporary Malaysian university life. The metaphors discovered illustrate students' struggles with university work and interpersonal relations, and are closely related to sensations and bodily action, influenced by the contemporary culture. Multiple meanings aspect is discussed and the factors that promoted change are analyzed.

**Keywords**—component; Metaphor, metaphors in counselling, changes in counselling, Malaysian students counselling experience.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigate what kind of metaphors, how they are used in a counselling setting, and the ways it facilitates changes in counselling process in the local university context of Malaysia

McMullen, [1], draws conclusions based on his research that psychotherapy gives a fertile space for the study of metaphor. Applying metaphors in psychotherapy has had a long history in the area of psychoanalysis since the era of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung [2] as it provides a tool to facilitate complex analysis.

There are many conflicting theories which differ in their arguments about the nature of language and the interpretation of metaphor.

Aristotle's classical theory, in which metaphor was originally classified under figurative language, [3], has a tradition of similarity and resemblance. So initially metaphors were used to understand the transference of meaning from one object to another. The interaction theorists claim that the meaning of metaphor should be based

on the context of language as the sentences determine the meaning [4].

Searle [5] disagreed with both of the above, he argued that the traditional Aristotelian theory that involved comparison of similarities for the transferring of meaning was incorrect, because the truth conditions revealed in metaphor are not meant to be taken literally. Searle also rejects the interaction theory approach that stresses the notion of meaning depending on the sentence used. He holds that metaphorical meaning is not a result of an interaction with the context [7]. Metaphorical meaning, to Searle, is the speaker's utterance meaning based on transference of concepts. These concepts have transferable properties to be shifted from a source domain to another targeted domain that could be independent of language transaction.

We agree with Searle that the traditional rhetoric studies only explain the resemblance and substitute phenomenon. It is not sufficient to explain the multiple meanings in the use of metaphor. In the phrase "My heart is a sea" for example, it is obvious that my heart is not a sea literally. Metaphors are implicit similes. The transferring of meaning is beyond the linguistic analysis of signifier and signified as initiated by Saussure's theory. The meanings of metaphor depend more on mental perception or the mental representation of "sea". Ricoeur [3] located metaphor as a representation in the process of rationalization. This rationalization is a result of analogy and comparison deduced from an implicit process when an image or figurative object is intuitively grasped as a consequence of association and imagination. This new meaning created is what Ortony called a constructivist view of the "relation between language, thought and the world [8, 16]. Therefore the insights emerging from the process are not purely cognitive reasoning. Frye [3] wrote about the poetic value of metaphor. Paradoxically the affective component of this poetic value is not raw subjective emotion. It is the affective component that is rooted in the reality of the person. So metaphor is a poetic language that is capable of connecting the past and present, linking cognitive and affective, as evident in the neuro-physiological research studies that locates metaphor in the right hemisphere of brain processes [10] and some researchers even claim that metaphor is capable of connecting all systems [9].

Searle [5] has made advances which provide a great contribution to the philosophy of language. For Searle, people do not just utter some words or sentences. The linguistic domain closely associates with the speakers' minds. The words actually speak the mind and the intention of the mind and, as a result, produce direct actions. Many

researchers have investigated language in use, and most agree that in functional language, language is intended to achieve actions. The power of language is not just “to refer, represent, communicate, or express” [1], but also, to act [4]. Halliday links the “behaviour potential” with its “meaning potential” and is rather similar to Searle’s approach to put the use of metaphor into the realm of functional language where what a man “can mean” is what a man “can do”. So, language speaks the mind, expresses feelings and directs actions, and even directs to tacit assumptions and the less-than-conscious (ibid) which refers to subconsciousness in psychoanalysis. Widdowson [6] terms it as encoding the semantic meanings to pragmatic purpose when people act upon it appropriately to the communicative intentions.

In recent research, metaphors has been identified as a powerful figurative language that can provide insights on conceptualization for counselling training [11] especially for counselling supervision [12], and as an instrument for orchestrating change in counsellor training process [9]. Much research has been done that focused on the power of metaphors in facilitating the work of psychotherapy [1].

McMullen evaluates the use of metaphor in psychotherapy [1]. He disagrees with the bold claims of its effectiveness both in theory-based and empirical based research. The former claims that the appropriate and strategic use of metaphor helps to achieve its effectiveness. The latter focuses on explicating how the use of metaphor relates to its outcome. McMullen is not convinced as both ignore the cultural discourses. He identifies the direction in which metaphor research should move from a highly decontextualized approach to contextualized issues such as what is said using metaphors and how it is said [1]. Halliday [4] echoes the same as the individual sees the world through his membership of “society” and he sees language as relations based on meaning.

## II. METHODOLOGY

In the light of the above literature analysis, this research was designed to find out the use of counselling in facilitating changes in the university context of Malaysian Chinese culture. The 68 participants in this research were a group of student counsellors in training, aged 20 – 24. They were advised not to initiate metaphor but pay attention to the metaphors initiated by the client. Demonstrations were given in classes and in tutorial group sessions showing how to focus on the metaphors given by the clients and ask questions that would help to explore the various details of metaphor. Counsellors were encouraged to stay within the metaphor to observe the facilitating factors that promotes change in clients. Each counsellor was to conduct 3 to 5 counselling sessions with the same client. All the clients are voluntary clients, mainly students from different universities. Each participant chose one of the sessions to do verbatim and to present it during a case conference. Not every client made use of a metaphor, but when metaphors were used, a narrative account is discussed and analyzed. Questions asked in the counselling sessions that facilitate exploration and changes were recorded and discussed in the case conference.

Basic research procedure followed a qualitative research design and grounded theory was adapted as a way of thinking about and investigating social lives [12].

## III. FINDINGS

As a wide range of metaphors emerged from this study, the list of metaphors presented is not exhaustive but follows the over-arching themes which emerged from the data. Characteristics of metaphors initiated by the clients were sensation based, reflecting the cultural context of the participants, which surrounds these students’ lives, as they struggle with both a busy academic workload and establish meaningful relationships.

### A. *Metaphors closely related to sensations and bodily action:*

They are like **plain water and whisky** to me (sense of taste described the quality of relationships), my life is a **dark hole** (sight), the university life is **sweet and bitter** (taste).

I am **small**/ I feel **small** (all the subjects are new to me, I feel inadequate).

I am **holding a hot cup, I certainly want a better cup of coffee** (client was not happy with the current situation).

I am lost in the **weighing scale** (as to who is more important)  
Link to **action**: The **lane** or **road** become narrower as money was spent (student used up all his money before the end of month)

The clients in this study normally used a noun (water, hole, cup, weighing scale, road etc), which is a figurative object and can be visualized to describe their emotions (feelings towards the quality of a relationship, the struggling feelings of being in the darkness, unsure of who is more important and feeling of being trapped and stumbling as the situation became difficult to cope)

The metaphors used were closely linked to bodily sensational responses (sight, taste, touch etc) and highly emotionally provocative, such as ‘plain water’ to describe dull and bored feelings, and ‘whisky’ for an excited feeling. Clients obviously preferred a more exciting relationship, or a more enjoyable and fantastic situation. Student counsellors reported these emotional changes by using client observation skills to note clients’ physiological changes such as facial expression, vocal qualities and body language. Pupils’ expansion and dilation were observed when clients shared excited feeling (whisky and coffee), low tone and low energy was observed when clients shared about ‘dark-hole’ and ‘narrow road’ experience. Quivery sounding, high pitch, change of speech rate etc were observed when the subject described was emotionally loaded. Physiological changes are highly related in emotional metaphors and this is supported in the literature [14].

### B. *The metaphors used describe contemporary university lives:*

#### **Struggles with university work**

I am drowning in a pool/ in the sea during mid-term and exam period.

Who is my **compass**? Where is my **compass**?

I wish to see a **bright star** after **heavy storm**.

University life is not a bed of roses.

Where are my **music scores**?

I am not able to **sing** given such a heavy work load.

I am not a superman.

A few students regretted their limited language ability: I am a **bird without wings**. Many lamented the workload: **wearing bigger hat**. Most long for a break: Wait till term break, I will go to the **petrol station**. Some long for a happy outcome: I hope it is just what **Cinderella** needed to go through. Some struggled to kick off some habits: Smoking is **part of my body**, can you **cut away my hand or my leg**? Compute game is my **Nicotine**.

**Struggles with relationships**

Course-mates are **passers-by**; I become a **wall**; this is not an important **chapter**;

To me, she is **angel** and I am a **frog**. I am **addicted** to and **poisoned** by love.

My mother becomes a **bridge** between me and my father.

My father is a **Qin Huang Ti** (emperor)

I am a **solo king** (client is the chair person of a society in the university)

I am just **passing by** (only a stranger in her life)

Am I an **alarm clock** (Do I need constantly to remind group group-mates about assignments?)

The context of metaphors used is important [15]. If we analyze the metaphors used by applying source-to-target mapping, which refers to a cognitive analysis whereby clients transfer the conceptual meaning from a source (such as a compass, a bed of roses) to a target (the feelings of loss of direction, comfortable university life), it is found that the meanings were instantly grasped by the student counsellors. Upon verification with the clients, counsellors reported that the metaphors provided a tool for clients to further explore their feelings. Counsellors reported that it was easier to focus on the metaphors for exploration for feelings especially in the initial stage of the counselling sessions (the first few counseling sessions) as the counsellors and clients were more comfortable expressing their feelings using metaphor rather than directly describing them.

The examples cited above show that the students used metaphor by transferring the source meaning from source to target to give descriptions of their university experience

### C. *The metaphors used reflect the current culture:*

**LV bag** versus **Gucci bag** (client used the quality of bags represent her relationship with two boy friends).

The metaphor cited above reveals information derived from advertisements.

Computer language was found in this study:

How can I **delete** him from my life. (Deleting a file from a computer is much easier).

Computer game is **Nicotine** for me. (The new generation is very much addicted to computer games).

The above cited metaphors reveal that the new generation is computer savvy. Below are some more metaphors used by the younger generation. Most of them were very much influenced by contemporary cartoon figures from the media. Examples are: They are Power Rangers (refers to the strong bond between friends) SpongeBob Square Pants (client lost

confidence and pride as he did not have money to spend in front of his friends). Others like Superman and Tweety Bird belong to the same category.

The exploration of metaphors were grounded in the stories of the younger generation who study in a fast paced, trimester designed university. Students have to fulfill individual assignments, group assignments, group presentations, mid-term and final examination of each subject within a time span of 3 months.

### D. *The multiple meanings of metaphors*

The aspect of multiple meanings of metaphor is evident in this research. Some clients use **PHD** (not referring to an academic PhD degree, but 'permanent head damage' to refer to pregnancy) **United States' time** (refers to having too much time, not sure what to do with it) **Sandglass** was used by two clients referring to two completely different situations (life in the sandglass and friendship in the sandglass).

Three clients used "I am a **kite**" one referred to the sensational feeling of flying in the sky, but another client referred to a negative meaning of being controlled by her boy friend who was holding the string. The third client said "he is a kite but I cannot get hold of him" (she feels incapable of getting back in the relationship).

Therefore the multiple meanings in metaphors depended on the creativity of clients and they are subjected to more clarification in the dialogical context of counselling.

### E. *Attending to metaphors in counselling facilitates changes*

The following are a few examples which are cited to illustrate how metaphors promote changes as described and narrated by the participants.

Example 1 **Facebook is Nicotine for me**

Client: Facebook is Nicotine for me

Counsellor: So you are addicted?

Client: Yes, I cannot stop myself, I have more than 3000 Facebook friends, and I basically can spend more than 15 hours on the computer...

The Counsellor continued to stay with the metaphor given by the client. This metaphor provided an opportunity to talk about the effect of this addiction. The exploration included: Do you enjoy this Nicotine? How does this Nicotine affect your life? What did this Nicotine do to you? How did the people around you think about this Nicotine? At the end of the counselling session, the client was able to come out with a realization that this Nicotine has taken over control of his life and he is currently working towards how to get back to normal student life.

Example 2: **Angel and Demon**

The client mentioned he was not happy with himself as sometimes he was an angel but sometime he was a demon. The Counsellor stayed with this metaphor by asking, when was the last time you became an angel and what made you changed to a Demon?

The client then drew out his story that all along he was an angel because he was well liked by friends, always cheerful and helping other people. After a recent betrayal he had become a demon and he became very suspicious when

people asked him for help. He would refrain from being altruistic due to the painful memory of being “stabbed” by his previous best friend. Maintaining and exploring the metaphor results in an insightful conclusion: he feels thankful to this demon who reminded him to be more cautious with people but he still chooses to listen to the angel when the situation demands as he is more happy to be an angel.

**Example 3: A swan raised by a duck family**

Client sees herself as a “swan” being raised by a “duck family”. “The ducking family” members were less educated and they quarrel most of the time. Client disagrees with her family members’ values and behaviour and she feels that she has the potential to perform better in life. When asked the difference between her experience and the duckling fable, and how she would like her story to end, she expressed insight “though they are duckling but I still love them because they gave me education and they are my family”

**Example 4: My father is Qin Huang Di** (Emperor of the Qin Dynasty)

This was a Mandarin speaking client. He described his father as the Emperor of the Qin dynasty who united the huge country and the Chinese people using the Mandarin language. The Emperor built the Great Wall of China by enslaving and oppressing his people. The exploration of this metaphor exposed an unhappy growing up experience and his broken relationship with his father. His mother became a bridge between him and his father. Reconciliation didn’t happen after the three sessions of counselling, but the client was more aware of the influence of his father on him. And his cognitive understanding about his father-image somehow changed as he concluded “he is also no choice to become the person he is now” This metaphor made the counsellor wondered if the client was an English speaking person, would he probably use Hitler, Napoleon or other tyrant king in the Western history?

**Example 5 Am I a piece of white paper**, anyone can write on it anyway?

Client was angry after being hurt by her close friends. She realized that she had allowed other people mess up her life. She was angry with herself for being so naïve. The student counselor actually disagreed with the client. He agreed that as human beings we are affected by the people around us and let people sketch and draw on us, especially when we are young. But we cannot totally let other people decide our lives. Therefore the counsellor helped the client to stay with the white paper metaphor to explore what she really wanted for her life.

Upon reflection by the student counsellors, it was found that attending to metaphor in counselling helps both the counsellors and the clients. The counsellors felt that they could grasp the clients’ story better and they could ask questions within the metaphor given without being too confrontational. When the images in metaphor were explored, as in the case angel or demon, and swan or ugly duckling, clients were able to make a choice as new understanding was attained.

A holistic approach is presented as the clients were engaged in talking about their thoughts which are also

heavily loaded emotionally (hated the Qin Huang Di figure father, hated being messed up by other people in life); the process of exploration of metaphors promoted changes (realized what an addiction of facebook done to him; being born in a duckling family was not a choice and it was also not a choice for the family members to be that way either). In the end changes were possible because the change in cognition affected the change of behaviour.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of metaphors initiated by the clients and the ways attending to metaphors in counselling facilitate changes. Most of the metaphors emerging from this study were initiated by the clients and were related to emotions. Kovecses et al [14] contend that the feature of emotional language is highly figurative. In Kovecses’ study, metaphor and emotions are highly related and he suggests these emotions have “an intrinsic force tendency toward action” [14].

These forces could be grasped instantly by the counsellors as those metaphors were figurative and conceptualized metaphors. The similarities of the metaphors used from the source domains and targeted domains were observed and this is in accordance with most cognitive psychologists [16,17]. However, the transferring of meanings from the source domains to the targeted domains can be complicated. The meanings of metaphors depend on the grasping the client’s “belief and intention” [7] of the speaker. The pragmatic communicative function in counselling is not that clear cut. The counsellors need to understand from a specific thematic dimension of the context, such as in the case of good nature of the Angel and the bad nature of Demon or the innocent aspect of a piece of white paper.

Ricceur [3] proposed that the function of metaphor is for interpretation. Interpretation seeks to find meanings, and meaning seeking is an important aspect in counselling. Counsellors work towards helping clients to have a more functional and positive interpretation of what happens in their lives. Jaszczolt [7] analyzed Searle’s pragmatic theory about the meaning of metaphor. He concluded that metaphors allow the speaker to express his meaning. In this case, the meaning of metaphor is considered beyond the realm of semantic studies as the semantic approach is of the view that meanings should be determined by analyzing the sentences. Although we can still locate the meaning of metaphors in the vein of cognitive semantics [7] where conceptualization lies, however, the metaphoric meaning is far beyond anything the cognitive semantic approach could offer. From the findings of this study, we are of the view that the meaning of metaphors used by the clients cannot be determined by the sentences, but by the speaker’s construction of meaning from their real life experiences. Language is shaped by our living environment as evident in this study, and clients use the metaphors derive from their living environment. One client viewed his father as Qi Huang Di as he connected the authoritarian parenting style as such and he got this vocabulary from his culture. However, the interpretations that clients made were not final because

there were some changes in their interpretation of their experience as shown in the example of the ugly duckling. The “utterance meaning” (term used by Searle) was about action done by the speakers (such as promising, commanding, complaining or meaning) but the state of the uttering meaning was not stable since changing of meaning were possible. This findings show that the changes of “utterance meaning” happened in a counselling process where construction and negotiation of meanings were possible. Moreover, the change of interpretation leads to change of attitude and action, as in the case of ugly duckling where the client realized that a low education background was not a choice for the family.

The potential of metaphors is left forever and deliberately open, as claimed by Jaszcolt [7]. Jaszcolt stated that the exact meaning is often left to the hearer as the meaning of this poetic and figurative language is intuitively and effectively understood but is never satisfactorily paraphrasable [7]. Steen [17] acknowledges the importance of elaboration in order to understand the metaphors used. The process of “elaboration” is quite similar to the “exploration” process in counselling, however, two parties will be involved in a counselling process. We would argue that the meanings are to be negotiated and constructed in a counselling setting as shown by the above cited examples. Counsellors normally facilitate changes by using a non-judgemental approach and open-ended questions for exploration [18]. The use of metaphors has helped to make the implicit explicit, hence help the clients to gain insight and make changes to their lives. The aspect of what a person “can say” is also what a person “can do”

## V. CONCLUSION

Metaphors discovered in this study reveal the school lives and the interpersonal relations of students’ lives. They also reflect the contemporary culture. The finding of this empirical study was in line with the previous research in the types of metaphor used by clients which is sensational and figurative, and closely related to the culture. This poetic approach creates a therapeutic encounter with clients as space was created within language to allow new construction of meanings to generate changes. This was possible in a counselling setting as counselling is a helping process where clients are encouraged to expand their cognitive understanding and thus bring about other changes such as feelings and actions. Future research on metaphor is needed to further explore the complexity of relation between language and psychological factors.

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