The nuances of metaphor theory for constructivist psychotherapy

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Abstract

Constructivist psychotherapy and contemporary metaphor theory, as part of the neighboring fields of psychology and linguistics, share fundamental assumptions rooted in constructivist philosophy. There has been much cross-disciplinary discussion of how our inclination towards metaphors translates into an important meaning-making resource in therapy and other domains of professional practice such as education. Nevertheless, more reciprocal effort is needed to a) show practitioners the relevance of nuanced aspects of metaphor theory and linguistic analysis that may evade their attention, and b) sensitize linguists towards practice-driven factors in their analyses. This article attempts the first of these tasks by identifying and exemplifying four such aspects: a) source domains at different experiential levels, b) variable source-target relationships in discourse, c) metaphorical processes at higher levels of analysis, and d) discursive and communicative grounding of metaphor. I suggest how they might provide pertinent insights and future directions for interpreting, analyzing, and working with metaphors in psychotherapy.

Keywords: metaphor, linguistic analysis, psychotherapy

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Metaphor from a constructivist perspective

Readers of this article should require no introduction to constructivism (Glasersfeld, 1996). Its many theoretical variants uphold two common assumptions - that knowledge is actively constructed rather than passively assimilated, and that such constructions help us adapt to rather than represent the world. People are "active meaning-makers who organize their experiential world for the sake of survival rather than to represent ontological reality" (Raskin, 2011, p. 224), and "all knowledge is relative to the construct, culture, language, or theory that we apply to particular phenomenon" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009, p. 433). Early theorists like George Kelly (1955a, 1955b) and Roy Schafer (1976) laid the foundations for the constructivist approach to psychotherapy (Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995), which emphasizes 'active meaning making' and interpretation rather than pure objective facts about clients and their problems.

Constructivism also had a deep influence on linguistics, a neighboring discipline that shares with psychology a fundamental interest in mind and meaning. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; G. Lakoff, 1993), part of a larger paradigm known as 'Cognitive Linguistics' (Taylor & Littlemore, 2014), exemplifies this. The theory agrees with the basic sense of metaphor as describing one thing in terms of another. However, it departs from the traditional view that metaphors are ornamental, to claim that they pervade everyday language and structure our conceptual systems. Consider a prosaic expression like *our relationship is at a crossroads*. Underlying this stand-alone metaphorical description is a

systematic body of inferences about the general notion of love derived from the general notion of journeys. For example, just as travelers hesitate at a crossroads and worry about getting lost, lovers hesitate at a point in their relationship and worry about potential difficulties. Our conceptual systems are structured by numerous sets of such 'cross-domain mappings' where experientially concrete concepts (e.g. journey) serve as 'source domains' mapping onto more abstract 'target domains' (e.g. love). A set of mappings and the two linked domains constitutes a 'conceptual metaphor', which linguists represent in the form TARGET IS SOURCE – our example being LOVE IS A JOURNEY. The notion of conceptual metaphor explains how we understand clusters of conventional metaphorical expressions (e.g. *we are spinning our wheels, we can't move on*), and generate novel ones such as *I was driving alone on the highway of life till you hijacked me*, since both are motivated by the same set of mappings (G. Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been tested, challenged, and refined in three main strands of linguistics research. Psycholinguistic experiments have shown that people do recruit understanding of concrete concepts to process abstract concepts and metaphorical language (Casasanto & Boroditsky, 2008; Gibbs, 2011). Comparative linguistic analyses have documented the constancy and variation of conceptual metaphors across different languages and cultures (Kövecses, 2005; Yu, 2008). Discourse analysis, the thematic study of language use in the social world, has revealed how conceptual metaphors operate in the language and communication of a diverse range of contexts from politics to education (Low, Todd, Deignan, & Cameron, 2010; MacArthur, Oncins-Martínez, Sánchez-García, & Piquer-Píriz, 2012).

Metaphors are a good example of active meaning making in the constructivist sense. They reflect the organization, communication, and negotiation of understanding in non-objective but viable ways. In the psychotherapy context, the main theoretical components of a

conceptual metaphor - the target, source, and cross-domain mappings - broadly correspond to elements of psychotherapy discourse. The therapeutically relevant topic at hand corresponds to the target domain, the conceptual resources used to describe it corresponds to the source, while the ways in which the latter is understood to relate to the former correspond to the cross-domain mappings (Wickman, Daniels, White, & Fesmire, 1999). Figure 1 illustrates a schematic diagram of a conceptual metaphor and its therapeutic correlates.

<FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1 Schematic diagram of a conceptual metaphor in therapy

It is upon this general framework that many contemporary arguments for the potential benefits of metaphor use are advanced. Goncalves and Craine (1990, p. 139) argue that "from the constructivist position…the objective of metaphor is to create an opportunity to restructure the client's deep conceptualizations and tacit paradigms" – in other words, to provide systematic alternatives (sources) to existing constructions of reality (target). Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks (2001) suggest that metaphors help access and symbolize emotions, uncover and challenge tacit assumptions, and introduce new frames of reference, all of which allude to their power in constructing and expanding alternative perspectives. They provide an example of a client who describes love as a 'Monkey in the Middle' game where she is always the monkey trying to catch the ball, and the therapist providing alternative perspectives by encouraging her to view it as a different game. Kopp and associates (Kopp & Craw, 1998; Kopp & Eckstein, 2004; Kopp, 1995) emphasize client-generated metaphors and developing spontaneous metaphorical expressions into more inferentially robust scenarios which can represent clients' real-life situations. For example, when discussing his HIV infection, a client intimates that *there is a large dark cloud hanging over me*. The therapist follows up by

asking *what else is happening* and *what else do you see*, and the subsequent elaboration is mapped back onto the target domain of his HIV situation. Blenkiron (2005, 2010) and Stott et al (2010) take the opposite tack of recommending 'stock metaphors' which therapists can use to help clients understand typical therapeutic issues and conditions. Rather than explaining anorexia in literal terms, therapists may describe it as trying to drive a car without petrol. Metaphors are also deemed helpful for therapists in terms of providing varied perspectives on their professional role and identity in the context of training and supervision (Aronov & Brodsky, 2009; Raskin, 1999; Ronen & Rosenbaum, 1998).

Psychotherapeutic metaphor research is cross-disciplinary

There remain many promising avenues of research including cross-cultural applications (Dwairy, 2009), expressions of metaphor in non-verbal therapies such as art and dance (Samaritter, 2009), and most critically, potential pitfalls of metaphor use. These different directions face several common challenges. The first concerns stepping beyond theory to verify the effectiveness and explain the therapeutic mechanisms of metaphor. Although many studies report correlations between aspects of metaphor use and therapeutic change (Angus & Korman, 2002; Gelo & Mergenthaler, 2012; Sarpavaara & Koski-Jännes, 2013), it is still unclear if and how metaphor causes such changes (McMullen, 2008). This is mostly due to the difficulty in disentangling metaphor use *per se* from other covariates such as therapist interest and intensity of intervention (McMullen, 1996). A second challenge, which is the focus of this article, is to find ways to embrace the inherent cross-disciplinarity of psychotherapeutic metaphor research more meaningfully (Tay, 2016b). The present situation is that mental health practitioners interested in metaphor tend to overlook relevant theoretical

nuances developed on the basis of (psycho)linguistic studies of metaphor. Conversely, linguists tend to treat psychotherapy talk as just a case context for investigating metaphor - akin to metaphor in advertising, political discourse, or any other domain of social activity - and seldom discuss how theoretical knowledge of metaphor might address specific mental health concerns. While there are perfectly understandable reasons for these reservations and boundaries, I suggest that a stronger collaborative framework requires more reciprocal effort to

a) communicate to practitioners a more nuanced picture of linguistic analysis in general (cf. Avdi & Georgaca, 2007) and metaphor theory in particular

b) motivate linguists to ground aspects of their linguistic analyses more explicitly in therapeutic processes, outcomes, and other concerns

Given the present target audience, this article focuses on detailing the first point of this envisioned collaborative dynamic. I identify four specific theoretical dimensions and illustrate their relevance and potential contribution to the use and management of metaphor within a constructivist framework. Figure 2 previews this discussion by representing each of them – *source domains at different experiential levels*, *variable source-target relationships in discourse, metaphorical processes at higher levels of analysis,* and *discursive and communicative grounding of metaphor* – as an extension of the schematic conceptual metaphor framework seen in Figure 1.

<FIGURE 2 HERE>

Figure 2 An extended framework of metaphor in therapy

Source domains at different experiential levels

Conceptual Metaphor Theory claims that source domains build upon at least three levels of knowledge and experience, differing most saliently in terms of the degree of inter-subjective understanding the attendant metaphors are likely to have. Perhaps the most keenly discussed is the embodied level, where everyday bodily experiences such as warmth, hunger, walking towards a destination, and moving in and out of physical containers constitute a near-universal basis for metaphorically understanding more abstract target counterparts (Grady, 1997; Johnson, 1987; G. Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Expressions such as *I had warm feelings, I was hungry for success, I moved on,* and *I fell out of love* are easily understood and translatable into different languages because not only are the source (e.g. warmth) and target (emotional intimacy) universally experienced, they often co-occur in everyday experience which strengthens the mappings between them. Our bodies get warmer when a loved one holds us intimately. Physical hunger is one of our earliest experiences of desire, and so on. Also often discussed is the cultural level, where culture-specific knowledge and experience are crucial in constituting, interpreting, and/or fully appreciating the source domain and attendant metaphor. Kövecses (2005) is a book length treatment of cultural variation in metaphor, documenting cases of cultural preferences for certain sources (e.g. Americans prefer to describe life as a precious possession while Hungarians prefer a struggle/war), as well as the uniqueness of certain sources to a culture (e.g. the Hmong language describes life as a string). Lastly, the idiosyncratic level is where the source-target connection builds upon knowledge and experiences unique to, or uniquely interpreted by individuals (Landau, Nelson,

& Keefer, 2015). A client who likens himself to a fictional character 'Sara', whom he presents to his therapist in a painting (Kopp, 1995, p. 69), is producing the idiosyncratic conceptual metaphor I AM SARA where little or no experiential or cultural knowledge of the source is shared.

Practitioners are not unaware of this theoretical distinction and its therapeutic implications. For instance, Stott et al (2010, p. 42-43) distinguish universal from cross-cultural metaphors and advise therapists to select "the right metaphor" that is most meaningful to the client. Zuñiga (1992, p. 57) shows how the interesting tendency for Spanish-language metaphorical proverbs to "compare people to animals" may be exploited by therapists to mitigate resistance, enhance motivation, and reframe problems. Blenkiron (2005, p. 55) discusses the 'individualization' of metaphor, or the reinterpretation of otherwise common sources in terms of the client's unique background. These ideas also echo the constructivist notion that

> even though individuals may draw upon common and publicly shared discriminations in constructing their conceptual templates, they typically develop construct systems that are in some degree idiosyncratic, giving their construct systems a richer personal significance than relying on simple dictionary antonyms (Hardison & Neimeyer, 2012, p. 4).

Nevertheless, when it comes to discussing different sources, the mental health literature tends to treat the three levels as mutually exclusive. Each source is embodied, cultural, or idiosyncratic, and sufficiently analyzed at one of these levels. There also seems to be a

complementary preference to work with each metaphor as a unitary and coherent scenario. For example, Kopp and Craw's (1998) 7-step interview protocol aims to interpret a single rich mental image made up of gradually emerging components starting from some spontaneous metaphorical utterance by the client. Here is where our first theoretical nuance becomes relevant – that each source domain/scenario can be simultaneously interpreted at all three levels, providing multiple inferential possibilities for a source with respect to a target (Gibbs & Cameron, 2008). To illustrate this simultaneity and its potential therapeutic relevance, consider a hypothetical scenario where the client remarks *life is like that long winding path from my grandma's house to the woods, full of mysteries and unknown dangers.* What strikes the listener most might be its idiosyncratic aspect where the client, perhaps as a young child, explores said location few other people know of. A therapist working with this image could however underline and switch between all three levels contributing to its inferential richness. He could isolate the embodied level and focus on the relatively universal notion of a path, discussing its logic and alternatives with the client. *How long is the path*, *what are the obstacles along the way*, and *what would life be like if we could find a shortcut*? An important feature of the embodied level is that the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is low. Drawing upon relevant psycholinguistic work (Gibbs & Matlock, 2008) in her discussion of metaphors for pain sensations, Semino (2010, p. 223) in fact suggest that embodied metaphors have "the potential to facilitate in the addressee some form of embodied simulation, and this may provide the basis for an empathic response" from healthcare professionals (cf. Tay, 2014). Tay (2013) further documents a case where therapist and client use various metaphors which appear to be mutually incoherent, but actually shared an underlying embodied inferential structure of 'moving out of a physical container', which facilitated the collaborative construction of a 'problem-solution framework'. The therapist

could also isolate the cultural level and work with motifs such as 'long winding path' and 'grandma's house', and their symbolic relationship to the client's present adult life. The focus here may be less on systematic and logical source-target correspondences, and more on what (part of) the source connotes by way of folklore, religion, and other cultural elements. Just as a therapist alludes to a Qur'anic verse in response to his Muslim client's remark that *running to my* (abusive) *mother… is like the spider taking refuge in its web*, and suggests that God is the more appropriate 'web'(Ahammed, 2010), the present therapist may explore the distinct evaluate slant inherent in the English phrase 'long winding path' (cf. Cameron & Deignan, 2006) in the context of the client's life. A final body of inferences may be available at the idiosyncratic level by exploring aspects of the metaphor that are specific to, and uniquely understood by the client. The client may for instance have genuine vivid memories of experiencing the mysteries and dangers of his grandmother's house and its surroundings, and transferentially associate these with his present life (Grant & Crawley, 2002). Furthermore, since therapists are likely unable to contribute substantive details at the idiosyncratic level, the opportunity for clients to play a key role in facilitating their own betterment may instill in them a stronger sense of agency and empowerment.

In summary, the ability to perceive, deconstruct, and elaborate a single source domain at different levels, each underpinned by a different inferential logic, may be a handy tool for therapists working with their own or clients' metaphors. Interested readers could refer to Tay (2013, p. 47-73) for a more detailed case study of how these levels complement one another in the co-construction of a rich metaphor scenario by therapist and client.

Variable source-target relations in discourse

Besides the nature of source domains, metaphor theorists have also been concerned with the nature of the source-target relationship. How do people comprehend and construct relationships between a given source and target, and does the context of comprehension and construction play a role? Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposes a fairly context-independent 'correspondence model' where each entity, attribute, and/or relation in the source is linked to a target counterpart in isomorphic fashion (G. Lakoff, 1993). When a metaphorical expression is encountered, the underlying mappings are activated and comprehension occurs. A similar logic could be applied to characterize metaphor production. The correspondence model, for example, aptly describes the construction of analogies in science texts where authors explicate the structure of a complex target in terms of a structurally similar source (Wee, 2005) – imagine any standard paragraph likening the Rutherford atomic model (target) to the solar system (source). Therapists are not particularly concerned about the theoretical nature of the source-target relationship, but seem to acknowledge the validity of the correspondence model in relevant discussions. Sims & Whynot (1997, p. 3) for instance remark that "each addition to the development of the (metaphorical) image has a parallel, but unstated, impact on the other side of the equation", which clearly brings the model to mind.

However, the correspondence model (and Conceptual Metaphor Theory in general) has received criticism most notably on the grounds of cognitive economy and the limits it imposes on metaphorical creativity. Some cognitive psychologists prefer more economical and context-dependent models of source-target relations to the idea that numerous cross-domain mappings are stored in semantic memory (Glucksberg, 2003; Murphy, 1997). Others argue that the unidirectional flow of inferences from source to target in the correspondence model fails to account for creative instances of metaphor use where source and target

elements seem to be 'blended' in dynamic ways (Coulson & Van Petten, 2002; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). As was the case for the correspondence model, these alternatives can also serve as templates to characterize how source-target relationships are (co)-constructed in metaphor production. The idea that there is more than one principled way to construct and communicate a source-target relationship bears clear therapeutic implications, but is seldom discussed among therapists. The following extracts of actual psychotherapy talk (T=therapist, C=client) each illustrates a different mode of (co)-construction and will be discussed in terms of their theoretical underpinnings and potential therapeutic relevance. Portions of interest in the extracts are underlined.

Extract 1

T: And this is the other one that I quite like. So there's a school bus and you are the driver. On this bus we have a bunch of school kids. The bus represents the direction you are taking in your life and the school kids represents thoughts, feelings, bodily states, memories, other aspects and experience. What happens is that you're driving along and the school kids start calling out to you telling you what you have to do and where you have to go. So you have to make a left turn, you've got to make a turn right, you've got to speed up, got to slow down. They start calling you names, they start threatening you. Sometimes they even start throwing things at you. Even though the school kids are unpleasant, annoying, distracting, they don't actually hurt you. The trick is to keep on driving the bus in the direction you want despite the antics of the school kids in the back. Accept the noisy school kids as just being something that comes with being a bus driving and eventually they get tired and stop misbehaving. So if you've got all this distracting, horrible, negative stuff at the back of the bus my job is to just keep on driving my bus and keep going in the direction I want.

C: Ignore them and they will go away.

In Extract 1 the therapist constructs a systematic analogy. The source domain consists of a school bus, its driver, a bunch of school kids, and relations between all of these. The driver wants to take the bus in a certain direction but is constantly distracted by the kids' misbehaviour. However, if the driver focuses on his task, the kids will eventually stop misbehaving. These elements and relations are neatly and explicitly mapped onto the target domain. The driver represents the client, the bus his life direction, the misbehaving kids his negative thoughts, feelings etc. Most importantly, the source domain inference that the kids will eventually stop misbehaving translates into a practical guideline which he seems to understand and accept in his following turn. Extract 1 is a good example of source-target relations being constructed as per the correspondence model. Its most striking feature is a careful description of both the substantive and structural properties of the source and target. Although this mode of construction seems more characteristic of 'stock metaphors' prepared in advance and unilaterally communicated, it may also work well for collaborative exploration as both therapist and client discuss and contribute new entities and relations to the chosen source domain. As this happens, insights may occur in the target domain in the form of previously unconsidered people, objects, events, circumstances etc. relevant to the issue(s) at hand. The semblance of systematicity inherent in the correspondence model may also be favourably perceived in the context of metaphor as a therapeutic technique, as is the case for science education (Tabor-Morris, Froriep, Briles, & Mcguire, 2009), and this could be further investigated.

Extract 2

T: It sounds like your husband is really sort of <u>a tyranny</u> for you, where you don't get to be yourself at all. Do your thing. You sort of get <u>locked in this little box</u> with somebody else doing everything.

C: Yeah and I think so many people though have done it. I think a lot of just TV has done it and all these stories. I'm sure a lot of times that they've done it in good humor and stuff but it's really getting to be something. Like even women's liberation is coming up with these things against men that's affecting them.

T: It really seems to you like it would take an enormous amount of control and stuff to be able to <u>break out of that mold</u>.

In Extract 2 the therapist explores the client's sense of not being able to 'be herself' and 'do her thing' while with her husband. In contrast with Extract 1, there is not one coherent source domain but three. The husband is described as a *tyrant*, her situation is like being *locked in a little box*, and she will need a lot to break out of the *mold* set presumably by her husband. While each of these source domains would have presented a different inferential structure to be related to the target, none are thus elaborated. Instead, they seem to be co-deployed to support a larger common theme which characterizes the client's situation – a general abstract sense of being trapped and controlled. In other words, the objective is not to relate the substantive and/or structural specifics of source to target (e.g. *what type of lock is it? how small is the box?*), but rather to use different things to illustrate the overall quality of a feeling, experience etc. Metaphor theorists call this the 'class inclusive' (Glucksberg, 2003; Wee, 2005) model. Instead of exhaustive mappings linking source to target, the source merely exemplifies in a vivid manner some quality which applies to the target, but which is difficult to state literally. Both source and target reflect this overarching quality, hence the term 'class inclusive'. The husband as a tyrant hence emphasizes his controlling nature, the little box emphasizes her condition of being trapped and helpless, breaking the mold

emphasizes her desire to be free of this control, and all three are complementary in depicting the overall situation. There are conceivable situations in which the class inclusive mode may be more appropriate than the correspondence mode. For example, a source may be particularly attractive for its special significance to the client, but not possess distinct structural properties. The emphasis on quality over structure may also be useful when it is preferable to brainstorm different sources and ideas, given that people often conjure very different sources to capture any single overarching quality, and conversely, that a single source may be understood to reflect different qualities by different people (Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999). Any one of these sources can always be elaborated later with the correspondence model if so desired (cf. Tay, 2010).

Extract 3

T: What did the little boy do behind the castle walls all these years?

C: I guess he sat in the dark and was very quiet.

T: Until now.

C: Until now.

T: Where is the little boy now?

C: In the castle...Oh God!

T: What?

C: I'm the castle! The little boy is locked up in me! God, I didn't know!

In Extract 3 (cf. Kopp, 1995, p. 64-91), the therapist and client have been co-constructing an elaborate metaphorical scenario where the latter imagines his younger self, as the 'little boy', being trapped behind the walls of a castle which he had seen in a recent dream. This followed the discussion of a childhood incident where he caught his father in an extra marital affair, among other negative experiences. The source domain corresponds to the target domain situation of his current emotional isolation and despair. The expression *I'm the castle! The little boy is locked up in me!* may seem creative but otherwise unremarkable. However, it actually reflects a third mode of constructing source-target relations. The main point is that instead of a unilateral transfer of inferences from source to target, where the known characteristics of castles, little boys etc are used to conceptualize the present situation, there is a flow of inference from target back to source. The client maps his understanding of his present self back onto the castle in the source domain, resulting in a 'conceptual blend' (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) where the imaginary castle now possesses characteristics from both domains. It is still a confining prison-like structure (source), but because it also represents his adult self (target), the client suddenly acquires a metaphorical agency to let the boy out. As already alluded to, this type of source-target construction reflects a more general cognitive process called 'conceptual blending', a theory commonly used to explain highly creative metaphors. It may well be that relatively eloquent and imaginative clients find such a metaphor construction dynamic more appealing. Compared to Extract 1 where the therapist explicitly demarcates domains and regulates inference flow by saying things like *X represents Y*, a conceptual blending approach allows therapists and clients more room to invent and interpret novel metaphorical scenarios and meanings. Conceptual blending theorists in fact eschew the notion of 'conceptual domain', which implies a static configuration of knowledge, in favour of the alternative notion 'mental space'. As "partial assemblies constructed as we

think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action" (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, p. 137), mental spaces may better characterize what goes on during these flourishes of therapist and/or client creativity.

In summary, while metaphor by and large involves describing and thinking of a target topic in terms of another conceptual resource, therapists may benefit from an awareness of different ways to bridge the two, as shown by psycholinguistics and discourse analytic research. These theoretical differences may at first glance seem remote from therapeutic realities, but each mode of constructing source-target relationships does appear more suited to a certain desired or appropriate form of communication. Interested readers may refer to Tay (2012), which applies these ideas to specific metaphor protocols; namely, Kopp & Craw's 7-step interview protocol and Sims & Whynot's 6-stage model (1997).

Metaphorical processes at higher levels of analysis

The third theoretical dimension pertains to metaphorical processes that occur at 'higher', or more abstract, levels than reflected by words. These should not be confused with metaphors in non-linguistic modes (e.g. art, dance) or even 'multimodal' metaphors where source and target are each in a different mode (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). It rather refers to cases where the mapped domains are not obviously tied to, and hence identifiable from, any distinct sign(s). An example is allegory in literature. Crisp (2001, p. 10) explains that "the allegory's metaphorical mapping is effected not via the language of the sentence but rather directly from the entities in the fictional world which that language itself characterizes literally". In the opening lines of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 1984)*,* for instance, 'I

saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place' is perfectly literal within the narrative world, yet the man and rags are intended as sources for humanity and sin. Such interpretations clearly require contextual inferences beyond linguistic knowledge.

Allegory is but one example of how conceptual metaphor can manifest in subtle ways. Tricky as it is for therapists to identify real or potential metaphors from spontaneous speech, there are other therapeutically relevant metaphorical processes that are even more evasive and hence underexplored. Here I focus on the phenomenon of transference as a case in point. Gelso & Hayes (1998, p. 11) define transference as "the client's experience of the therapist that is shaped by his or her own psychological structures and past, and involves displacement onto the therapist, of feelings, attitudes, and behaviors belonging rightfully in earlier significant relationships". Schaeffer (2007) aptly describes it as a 'double-edged sword'. If appropriately worked through, transferential activities can shed valuable light on how clients' past unconsciously affects their present and future. If not, they may continue to construe therapists as a negative, typically abusive figure from the past, resulting in premature termination (Grant & Crawley, 2002).

The relevance of metaphor to transference is apparent from Gelso & Hayes' definition. From a constructivist perspective, clients experiencing transference do not construe present reality in a pure objective way, but a representation of it based on past experiences. We may regard 'past' and 'present' as conceptual structures corresponding to source and target, with the cross-domain mappings representing the process of 'displacement'. Borbely (1998, 2008) provides a psychoanalytic account of the relationship between metaphor and transference, suggesting that the practice of psychoanalysis itself "relates past and present metaphorically to each other" (1998, p. 923). In other words, it involves constructing and interpreting the

PRESENT IS PAST (and PAST IS PRESENT) conceptual metaphors. Transference is a metaphorical process at a higher level of analysis because it does not occur as a one-off, 'localized' conceptualization involving two straightforwardly signalable domains, as is the case for 'love' and 'journey'. Instead, PRESENT IS PAST (and PAST IS PRESENT) underpin and constitute the key transferential dynamic, and the nature and ways in which this is instantiated in unfolding therapy talk should be of great interest to linguists and therapists alike.

Therefore, while mental health practitioners have theorized about the metaphorical nature of transference, linguists can contribute a perspective by examining how this metaphoricity is expressed or 'worked through' in actual psychotherapy interaction. As an example, in a case study of 15 hours of talk involving one therapist-client dyad at a Chinese university counseling centre (Tay, 2016a), I observed a gradual progression between two phases of 'working through' transference. The first phase involved explicit comparisons between present and past as illustrated by Extracts 4 and 5. The client is talking about helping her son deal with his psychological issues, and constantly compares this with her own father's situation in the past. The extracts have been translated from Mandarin Chinese and only the English version is presented here.

Extract 4

C: As I help my son, I want to take care of myself. I certainly do not want to feel the regret I have towards my father over my son's illness. I don't want it to appear again on my son. This is why I sent him to Beijing for treatment.

Extract 5

C. <u>Back then</u> I couldn't understand these things. But after I was laid off, I realized that my father was right in many ways, because someone who does not have a sense of crisis will not sense these things. <u>Now </u>I wish (son) could also have this sense of crisis.

Extracts 4 and 5 illustrate metaphor at a higher level of analysis. The present-past relationship is not signaled through any metaphorically used language. In Extract 4, the client literally expresses the transferring of regret over her father's past situation onto her son's present situation, most tellingly through the phrase 'appear again on my son'. In Extract 5, 'back then' and 'now', which connect discussion of something in the past with something in the present, support the thematic projection from past to present. Even though no metaphor is identifiable on the surface, these utterances provide clues that the client may be harboring deeper complex associations between her current parental and past childhood dispositions. As the dyad gradually explores these associations, we enter a second phase where the PRESENT IS PAST metaphor shifts from manifesting at the explicit propositional level (Extracts 4 and 5), to an unconscious level where the past is re-enacted and re-experienced through role-play.

<u>Extract 6</u>

T: See, father-in-law, our feelings are so close! <u>Your daughter does not look at your authority, and I feel that my wife has never seriously looked at me either</u>

C: This is wrong

T: My wife has never seriously understood, never seriously looked at my needs

(Several turns elaborating how her husband feels)

T: <u>I feel that you are treating me like how you treated your father</u>. If your father were here he would see it. It's obvious; you refuse to recognize my authority! I stated my request so clearly, but you don't understand it at all! You keep nagging and rebutting, <u>you don't understand what others want</u>

C: Do you understand what others want, then? You're always thinking of what you want

T: You see, you see, now I understand. Your relationship with your father is influencing our relationship until now. <u>You never look at the needs of others</u>

In Extract 6, the therapist role-plays as the client's husband to help her shift from merely recalling the past to re-experiencing it. This amounts to expanding the source (past) and target (present) domains to include not just conceptual entities, attributes, and relations, but also unconscious emotions and attitudes difficult to evoke and discuss propositionally. As the PRESENT IS PAST metaphor shifts from the conceptual to this 'transferential' level, its discursive characteristics change accordingly. Firstly, the client's active construction of PRESENT IS PAST in previous extracts contrasts with her seeming denial of same construction as she rejects the therapist's assertion in the first turn. Relatedly, while PRESENT and PAST were clearly demarcated in previous extracts, their simultaneous (re)enactment in the role-play blurs the lines between the two. We see how the therapist conflates them by addressing the client's father as if he were present. His remark that she *never looks the needs of others* is intended to apply to both present and past – another example of the previously discussed 'class-inclusive' insight, which contrasts with the unidirectional source-to-target inferencing seen in Extracts 3 and 4. Boberly's (1998, p. 923) suggestion that "the present is seen in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present" is concretely manifested here.

This sample analysis suggests the availability of conceptual metaphor as a framework to model, work through, and even explain the transferential condition to clients. It may for

instance be helpful for therapists to advise clients of its non-pathological nature; an outcome

of the human capacity to draw cross-domain associations. Clients' general tendency to

compare present and past may thus provide a point-of-departure for therapists to guide them

towards subsequent exploration at the transferential level, if it could be couched as a natural

extension of our inclination towards metaphoricity.

Discursive and communicative grounding of metaphor

The final aspect draws from a strand of metaphor research fast becoming a theoretical

paradigm in its own right. This body of work, which emphasizes the discursive and

communicative grounding of metaphor, has positioned itself as a critical but complementary

response to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Steen, 2011). The basic

idea is that conceptual metaphor research has focused too much on decontextualised patterns

in metaphorical language at the expense of other discursive and communicative elements that

interact with metaphor use. These include elements whose meanings are tied to co-occurring

metaphorical expressions, as well as characteristics unique to particular usage contexts that

shape metaphor use. Deductive approaches which make claims about the influence of

conceptual metaphors should therefore be complemented with inductive approaches under

which metaphor "emerges from the dynamics of language and thinking, and is at the same

time conceptual and linguistic" (Cameron & Deignan, 2006, p. 674).

The same line of criticism could apply to mental health practitioners working with

metaphor. Although many agree that metaphor use is not a matter of applying some invariant

technique, "there are few … studies which analyze actual therapy session transcripts" (Avdi & Georgaca, 2007, p. 158) and the links between metaphor and other discursive and communicative phenomena therein. As with previous sections, I will discuss short extracts and potential implications for therapists. Extract 6 illustrates the aforementioned linguistic features whose meaning and interpretation are inseparable from co-occurring metaphorical expressions, and Extract 7 exemplifies conventions unique to particular usage contexts that shape metaphor use.

Extract 6

C: And you know I could see the themes running through there as I wrote. You know like I am or when I was taking, using sort and I could see the theme there. And it surprised me because I had never really thought of it.

T: Um hmm. It somehow seemed to ring true.

C: Oh yeah, it did. It really did. And like I say, it was surprising to me. I think I kinda you know, compartmentalized different segments of my life.

T: Uh huh.

C: And I really didn't see the relationships as clearly as when I sat down and did that.

T: Um hmm. Yeah I'm kinda getting the feeling like ok, you're saying you saw it clearly. But how did you feel after seeing it clearly? Because it almost sounds like are you compartmentalizing another compartment?

C: Yeah, I see what you mean.

In Extract 6 the client talks about a helpful writing exercise given by the therapist. While the most eye-catching detail might be the metaphor of 'compartmentalizing different

segments', initiated by the client and picked up by the therapist, there is also a set of co-occurring linguistic features which collectively perform what linguists call 'hedging'. A 'hedge' is a device used by writers/speakers to indicate a degree of uncertainty towards a statement. Typical examples include *sort of*, *I guess,* and *in a way*, which seem to be relatively banal colloquial expressions. Linguists however have discovered interesting correlations between hedging and social variables like gender (R. Lakoff, 1975), and systematically studied why speakers hedge in particular social contexts. Prince et al (1982) observed that hedges are frequently used by physicians to communicate uncertainty when discussing medical and ethical issues. Relatedly, in a study of extended metaphors in psychotherapy talk, Tay (2011) observed the systematic use of expressions like *I mean* and *you know* at junctures where speakers adjust their meaning, or invite the listener to make a metaphoric inference. Since metaphors are by definition untrue, hedging may allow therapists and clients to maintain a semblance of objectivity while still using them to explore issues (Tay, 2014a). This is seen in Extract 6 as the therapist communicates the tentative quality of the client's insight (*It somehow seemed to ring true*), and the client responds by presenting his metaphor (*I kinda, you know*) in a way which invites further development. The therapist's next response proceeds to develop the metaphor, but *it almost sounds like* also serves as a deliberate statement of its metaphorical nature. By making it clear that they are communicating metaphorical rather than literal meaning, speakers consciously exploit metaphor as a conceptual mechanism and compel listeners to pay explicit attention to the source domain (Steen, 2008). This conscious but subtle creation of an alternative inferential space may facilitate or encourage clients to explore therapeutically relevant metaphors more freely without too much concern about its inherent non-truthfulness. Future empirical work can help verify this and other practical implications derived from similar analyses.

Our final example illustrates metaphors interacting with less obvious characteristics of the usage setting. Extract 7 consists of three turns by different interviewees (I1, I2, I3) on the same topic of a recent earthquake and its aftermath. All three had met the criteria for full or sub-threshold PTSD and were invited to describe their experiences.

Extract 7

I1: ... I mean it was the earthquake and how awful I was feeling and how worried I was feeling about that. But then, it was almost like everything else in my life was up for question. Like, everything felt so uncertain and like the whole ground had shifted, not just literally but under everything that I, you know, had going on and you know I was questioning do I even want to do my studies, not only do I want to stay here, do I want to break up with my partner because obviously that issue comes up when you're talking to someone about how you might not want to come home.

I2: It was very frightening. We were lying in bed and (partner) said, but we're pretty practical people, and he said, we've just been kicked in the butt by Mother Nature, now we're going to get kicked in the guts by the authorities

I3: … I think like most people I like to know that I'm sort of in control of my life. But when there's sort of rumbling from underneath you, there's nothing you can do.

I1 talks about how the earthquake brought great uncertainty to different aspects of her life. I2 recounts her frightening experience with the earthquake and difficulties with the authorities as regards insurance settlements. I3 discusses his loss of a sense of control during and after the earthquake. In all three cases, the speakers refocus an initial discussion of the earthquake to its aftermath. This transition is supported by metaphor; the concrete physical aspects of the earthquake (*the whole ground had shifted, kicked in the butt by Mother Nature, rumbling from underneath you*) were used as a source domain to communicate corresponding

aspects of its aftermath – studies, relationships, logistical issues, and so on. There are two noteworthy details about these metaphors. Firstly, contrary to received wisdom where a client's issue is assumed to be the target and some other concept the source, all three speakers spontaneously frame the earthquake as a source instead, and utilize it to establish a thematic connection with other issues further down the line. This implies that metaphors can perform an underexplored 'scaffolding' function besides its oft-discussed conceptualization function. Secondly, these examples remind therapists that useful source domains do not always have to be something 'artificial' and external to the therapeutic setting. They may well arise and be opportunistically recruited as the interaction unfolds, potentially enhancing its perceived coherence (Tay & Jordan, 2015). These alternative mechanisms of metaphor are likely a result of the unique nature of PTSD where many of the client's issues are already concrete in the conceptual metaphoric sense – hence their deployability as sources. In general, grounded analyses of metaphor in specific therapeutic settings may provide further useful insights into their use and management.

Conclusion

Researching and applying metaphor in psychotherapy is an inherently cross-disciplinary endeavor that requires a strong collaborative framework between language and mental health researchers, and a common theoretical grounding such as that offered by constructivism. I have tried to outline part of this framework by sketching and prompting mental health practitioners to consider the relevance of several nuanced aspects of linguistic analysis. While the four aspects were independently presented, the phenomena and processes they point towards may interact in ways which further underline the complexities of linguistic interaction. Metaphors and other elements of psychotherapy talk will always remain

fascinating for language researchers, and it is hoped that this will continue to inspire new directions for collaborative research and application.

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