

**NEW SOUTH AFRICA, OLD LANGUAGE? THE ROLE OF METAPHOR IN
REPORTING THE NEGOTIATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR
RELATIONS BILL, JUNE-JULY 1995.***

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1. The negotiations

In the new spirit of national unity, the South African government established a forum to facilitate tripartite discussions between representatives of government, business and organised labour - National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac). In the first half of 1995, Nedlac was the formal forum for the negotiation process around a new Labour Relations Bill (henceforth, "the negotiations"). However, by the start of June, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was planning a series of strikes to back the demands they were making within the Nedlac negotiations. In response, some representatives of business advertised that they were prepared to withstand strikes for as long as six-months. The conciliatory role of Nedlac seemed to be failing.

2. Metaphor in the negotiations discourse

At this stage, Eddie Koch, in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* [2-8.6.95] argued that COSATU's strike programme had important implications for the negotiation process. Koch claimed that:

1. If the mass action fizzles, they [COSATU-DB] will lose the fight for the heart of the vital Bill.

What is Koch doing by writing of the negotiation process in this way? Clearly, he is not talking literally. Essential elements of the vital Bill will be formulated through negotiated decisions taken within the Nedlac fora and not through any literal, physical, fight.

Following a pragmatic notion of linguistic meaning, we can say that there is an incongruity between a literal interpretation of Koch's utterance and the context of the utterance.¹ This incongruity leads the reader to seek a non-literal and, in this case, metaphorical meaning of the utterance. Although the term negotiations is not included in the utterance (1), it is implicit due to

the context of the preceding text, which is discussing the negotiation process. Hence, it seems reasonable to infer that Koch intends a metaphorical interpretation of (1), stated more explicitly here as:

2. The negotiations are a fight.

Bolinger (1980:156ff.) has argued that writers often use metaphors in mutually reinforcing thematic clusters. Koch's metaphor of negotiations as a fight is typical of a range of metaphorical language elsewhere, in his writing and the reports of other journalists (see Appendix 1). Reports which depict the negotiation process through phrases such as a fight, continued skirmishing and countervailing forces combine to systematically develop, reinforce and exploit a coherent metaphorical theme. This theme presents an image of the negotiation process as an ongoing battle or war.² Hence, we can argue that, for a time, Koch, and other journalists, wrote within a metaphorical theme which is encapsulated here as:

3. Negotiations as war.

Which brings us to the main questions of this paper.

- (a) What are writers doing by using the metaphorical language they select in discussing the negotiations?
- (b) What can be achieved by using language in this way?
- (c) Is metaphorical language being used in bad faith?

3. Partial perspectives

I noted in section (2) that newspaper reports included a variety of similar metaphorical images to describe the negotiation process. Writers can reinforce a particular metaphorical theme through repetition or what Wilson (1990:125) has called habituation - within a single text, or across texts in a wider discourse.³

Writers help to make their discourse coherent when they use metaphors associated by a common theme (compare Green 1989:101). However, metaphors contribute to a particular kind of discourse coherence. The presence of a metaphor or metaphorical theme generates values which influence the reader's perspectives on the phenomena or elements referred to by the terms in the metaphorical utterance.

We interpret metaphorical language by relating the features associated with one element (sometimes called the target domain) with the features associated with another element (sometimes called the source domain), to compute novel values for the target domain.⁴ For example, the metaphorical utterance in (3) requires readers to interpret the meaning of the target term negotiations in terms of values or meanings associated with the source term war. The term negotiations has been defined as:

- (a) to talk with others to achieve an agreement (Hanks 1992:891), or,
- (b) a process by which we attempt to influence others to help us achieve our needs, while at the same time taking their needs into account. (Lewicki, Litterer, Saunders and Minton 1993:v).

Whereas war is understood as:

open armed conflict between two or more parties, nations or states. (Hanks 1992:1521).

Hence, a writer's use of the negotiations as war metaphor encourages the reader to see negotiations from a particularly confrontational perspective. Where this metaphor is present as a theme in the discourse, a confrontational perspective of the negotiations process being discussed is enforced even more.

It is important to note that metaphorical perspectives are (a) partial, and (b) do not reflect the only possible perspectives on the phenomena related through metaphor. At a pragmatic level, metaphorical utterances highlight some values associated with the target term, but hide other values associated with the term (see Botha 1994:268 & L&J 1980a:319ff.).

Shared values associated with war which are salient for being related to negotiations include, among others, those listed in 4:

- 4a. Two or more parties contest aggressively for ultimate victory.
- b. Each party reveals as little information about its strategy and intentions as possible.
- c. Each party seeks to influence the other party's position and exploit weakness in the opposition by using pressure, control and confrontation.
- c. Each party tries to get the other to make concessions without doing the same.

In contrast, the negotiations as war metaphor hides alternative co-operative values which could also be associated with the term negotiations, such as:

- 5a. Two or more parties seek a co-operative agreement.
- b. Parties share information to establish underlying needs, interests and concerns.
- c. Parties consider a range of possible alternatives.
- d. Parties select the alternative that best meets the interests and needs of the negotiating parties.⁵

The confrontational character of past labour negotiations in South Africa makes it likely that language which talks of negotiations as war is not necessarily recognised as being metaphorical. Metaphors which are so culturally entrenched as to seem unconscious or natural have been called *iconic* (Bowers and Flinders 1990:42).⁶ A danger from a language ecology point of view, is that readers are less likely to question the partial perspective or the entailments of iconic metaphors; this is particularly so when reinforced in a coherent metaphorical theme (see Bolinger 1980:113-114; and Fowler 1991:127).

4. Covert claims

Language ecologists need to note that the entailments of metaphorical utterances are a powerful rhetorical tool. Hidden or covert propositions often go unchallenged because they are difficult to identify and contest. As a result, writers can deliberately abuse metaphorical language to get readers to accept covert claims without overtly exposing the claims to critical questioning (Bolinger 1980:149; Botha 1994:269).

For example, the negotiations as war metaphorical theme entails, amongst other things, an expectation of uncompromising confrontation and a clash of strength in the negotiations. At least one journalist (or the speaker reported) exploits this entailment to make a covert criticism of the government.

- 6. Instead of sticking to its guns there has been, as a negotiator said last week, a "ghost-like" presence from the government.

The non-literal meanings associated with sticking to its guns and a "ghost-like" presence make it likely that the writer intended a metaphorical interpretation such as:

- 7. The government is not being courageous, or consistent, neither is it maintaining a visible impact on the negotiation process.

As I have said, the negotiations as war metaphorical perspective entails that a role which is not strong or consistent is negative. Therefore, the writer's utterance of 6, in the context of the

existing public negotiations discourse, entails something like the covert proposition in 8:

8. The government's role in the negotiations has been undesirable and inappropriate.

There are three critical aspects to note here. Firstly, the war theme generates a perspective which gives no credence to a flexible or background role for any of the negotiating parties. Secondly, the blunt adversarial perspective glosses the complexity and multilayered reality of the negotiation process. And thirdly, the writer's use of metaphorical language conveys covert criticism in a way which is hard to recognise and therefore hard to contest.

5. Metaphorical transformation and new perspectives

The first theme I have identified is negotiations as war, which evoked a perspective emphasising the adversarial nature of negotiations. This perspective seemed natural for two reasons: (a) it reflected a fairly commonplace understanding of the nature of past labour relations negotiations in South Africa, and (b) this conventional understanding of events was reinforced by the proposed strike programme and management's public responses. However, the negotiations as war theme hid the possibility of, for example, a consensus seeking discussion around the tables of Nedlac or a prominent mediating role for the government.

The features hidden by the negotiations as war perspective, meant that this metaphor had to break down or be transformed when the negotiation process entered a significantly new phase. Towards the end of June 1995, the government began to play a more prominent mediating and decision-making role in the negotiations, and the possibility of a negotiated settlement began to seem more likely. It was time for writers to adopt a more appropriate metaphorical theme.

It was fortuitous for journalists seeking a dramatic and popular discourse theme, that the Rugby World Cup formed the backdrop to the Labour Bill negotiations process. Writers could exploit the national interest in the Rugby World Cup to attract interest and to convey select features of the negotiation process as it developed.

Not surprisingly, the negotiations discourse we analysed began to be characterised by a new metaphorical theme, negotiations as a rugby game. This metaphor allowed for new features to be associated with negotiations, but retained an adversarial perspective of the negotiation process

and capitalised on the national focus on the Rugby World Cup. Hence, it too presented a readily accepted, natural perspective on events.

Cameron (Cape Times [20.6.95]), for example, wrote of the Labour negotiation process as follows:

9. A crashing of the titans; deception; dummy passes; frontal attacks; crash tackles; tough referee calls; the occasional foul. A description of the Rugby World Cup final? Not at all. That was mild stuff compared with what is going on in the disputes over the government's planned labour relations reforms.

What is one doing by relating the negotiations to a rugby game? Interestingly, the perspectives noted in 4a-d could also be attributed to negotiations as a rugby game. Nevertheless, the negotiations as a rugby game metaphor allowed writers to invoke newly emerging features of the negotiations whilst retaining some features of aggressive competition characteristic of the old negotiations as war theme.

For example, in the same article cited in (9), Cameron also uses the negotiations as rugby game metaphor to talk of a clear role for the government:

10. More importantly, the referee, Labour Minister Tito Mboweni, who was starting to look more like a linesman, arrived on the field and appeared prepared to apply some rules.

Cameron is still exploiting the "strength is good" entailment of the confrontational theme to covertly criticise the government's earlier role. But he also commends a role which could not be accommodated in the war theme: namely, the government as a mediator resolving a conflict between labour and management.

6. Conclusion

The presence of metaphorical clusters and metaphorical coherence in discourse is neither exceptional nor necessarily malignant. However, the use put to the inferences and entailments evoked by the metaphors is an issue for an ecological analysis of language. The persuasiveness of live and iconic metaphors lends itself to deliberate abuse by political commentators, under the guise of coherent narrative or explanation. Amidst the possibly unconscious use of metaphors analysed in this paper, there were also examples of deliberate abuse of metaphorical language.

Such examples of writer's abuse of metaphorical language emphasise the need for a critical sensitivity to the implicit power of metaphors in public political discourse. Readers need to be alert to the ways in which metaphors are deliberately abused to present arguments and judgements.

This study also illustrates why readers and writers need to be aware of how metaphorical language may unwittingly limit the range of alternative possible interpretations of events. This is particularly a concern in cases where the metaphors are so commonly accepted as to seem natural and so pass unnoticed. Natural or iconic metaphors rely on well-entrenched frames of reference⁷; so they can perpetuate old, unquestioned perspectives rather than provide new ways of interpreting phenomena.

Perhaps it should be argued that iconic metaphors are to be viewed with double suspicion in the context of a country seeking to forge a new identity. New language and new metaphors are needed to open up the possibility of new meanings and understanding. This point was illustrated by the Labour Minister himself, who transformed the conventional rugby game metaphor in a novel way to suggest a new perspective on the Nedlac negotiations:

11. "We are in injury time and South Africans are well-known for scoring in injury time." (Minister Mboweni quoted by Bruce Cameron Cape Times 8[11.7.95].)

The spirit of national unity and victory encapsulated here seemed impossible within the themes of negotiations as war and, even negotiations as a rugby game. The metaphor of negotiations as Rugby World Cup victory, however, captures the original spirit intended of Nedlac. Mboweni's new metaphor seemed to alter the public discourse and capture the private events in Nedlac. On 17 July 1995, a Cape Times writer reported that a negotiated agreement had been reached in Nedlac; a new Labour Relations Bill was being drafted for presentation to parliament.

Notes

- * This paper arises out of a longer article submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an MA in the Department of General Linguistics, University of Stellenbosch.
- 1. A survey of diverse pragmatic perspectives reveals three characteristics of metaphor commonly accepted within pragmatic theories. These characteristics may be summarised as follows:
 - (a) In metaphorical utterances information is conveyed beyond the surface form of *what has been said*, therefore metaphors are pragmatic phenomena.
 - (b) Some incongruity (or tension) between a literal interpretation of an utterance and the context of the utterance leads the reader to recognise that the writer intended a metaphorical interpretation of the utterance.
 - (c) Metaphorical utterances are a feature of everyday language use and, therefore, can be explained in terms of some general principle or principles of communication (such as found in Grice's model (1975) of conversational interaction, the Principle of Co-operation and its maxims).

This paper relies mainly on Searle's (1979) pragmatic account of metaphor. An overview of pragmatic perspectives can be found in (Johnson 1981:22-23), (Martinich 1984 35ff.), (Searle 1979:98ff.) and (Van Dijk 1975:174-175). Also, (Wilson 1989:105ff.) reviews the implications of the pragmatic perspectives of Grice and Searle for a theory of metaphor, taking into account criticisms by Cooper (1986) and Davidson (1984). For another account of metaphor see (Kittay 1987) which tries to combine pragmatic and semantic perspectives of metaphor.

- 2. Rather than, for example, a once-off punch-up.
- 3. The term discourse is used here in two ways, to incorporate a narrow, technical notion of the concept and a broader notion. In a narrow, pragmatic sense, discourse can be defined as "a sequence of utterances" where utterances are "units of language production (whether spoken or written) that are inherently contextualized" (Schiffrin 1994:40-41). An example would be an individual newspaper report on the negotiations. A wider notion of discourse (as Foucault may use the term) would include, for example, all newspaper reports and public statements about the negotiations within Nedlac (compare Wilson 1990:126).
- 4. There have been various disputes among pragmatic theoreticians about how readers compute metaphorical meaning; see, for example, Martinich (1984-85:41ff.) and Searle (1979:105ff.) for contrasting views on the value of incorporating Black's (1979:28ff.) "semantic interactionist" approach within a pragmatic perspective. See also, (Jackendoff and Aaron [J&A] 1991) which argues that pragmatic and interactionist perspectives on metaphor are compatible. (J&A 1991) also shows that it is fruitful to synthesise a pragmatic theory of metaphor with the cognitivist theory advanced by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980a and 1980b) and Lakoff and Turner [L&T] (1989). J&A argue that the computation of metaphorical meaning involves a "superimposition" of "fusion" of target and source domains, rather than what Searle has described as an "association".
- 5. The selection of appropriate values in metaphorical analysis is a source of debate. See, for

example, (Martinich 1984:85:53) for a criticism of Searle; see (Wilson 1990:114ff.) for a discussion of the difficulty of choosing from multiple possible interpretations; and see (J&A 1989:324) for a criticism of the selection of metaphorical schema in (L&T 1989).

In this study, the salient values highlighted and hidden by the negotiations as war metaphor are deliberately drawn from Newall's model of Confrontational/Co-operative Negotiation (see Appendix 2). I do not assume that they are necessarily the values we would all associate with the metaphor; notwithstanding this, they serve to illustrate well the crux of my argument without detracting from its validity.

There are a number of similarities between the way the negotiations as war metaphor works and the argument as war metaphor discussed extensively in (L&J 1980a) and (L&J 1980b). See, in particular, L&J 1980b:77ff. for an analysis of the transition from a conversation to an argument, where argument is war.

6. Compare Lakoff and Johnson's (1980b:4ff) use of the term live metaphor (because they live in our conscious meaning-making of the world).
7. A frame or script or schema consists of the expectations (and associations) one has of a particular term, concept or thing. See, for example, Chilton 1988:62ff., Fairclough 1992:195ff., Fowler 1991:42ff. & 118ff. and Wilson 1989:123ff. for discussions of the abusive use of metaphorical scripts and schema within specific discourses.

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Appendix 1

Data sample - for analysis of metaphorical language

Eddie Koch Weekly Mail & Guardian [2-8.6.95]

1. It's do or die in the season of strikes
2. Do or die. That's how a union shop steward this week explained the Congress of South African Trade Unions' decision to stage a 1980s-style programme of mass action around the Labour Relations Amendment Bill. Although unintended, his statement may just portend the fate of organised labour after the protests in June.
3. The parties are divided about why this breakdown in what appeared to be a honeymoon spirit of cooperation and tripartism occurred so suddenly. Employers say it is a sign of weakness and desperation on the part of labour. Unionists insist it reflects a growing confidence and grassroots militancy in their ranks.
4. Either way, now that a de facto deadlock has occurred in the talks over the Bill...the labour movement stands at the crossroads.
If the unions' collective muscle is strong enough, they will stamp their mark on a law that will shape industrial relations for the next few decades. If the mass action fizzles, they will lose the fight for the heart of the vital Bill.
5. Says Coleman: "If the mass action fails, the workers' grievances will simply resurface later. There will be continued skirmishing and these issues will continue to raise their heads until they are resolved."
6. For the time being, however, employers have battened down the hatches and are hoping that the countervailing forces will take the wind out of union strength in June.

Bruce Cameron - Cape Times [20.6.95]

7. Freedom is at stake in labour's showdown with business
8. The fundamental issue of freedom is at stake in the showdown between organised business and organised labour.
9. The government itself is giving the impression that it is weakening on the issue or does not have sufficient will to deal with the problem in an effective manner.
There appears to be a lack of will to tell organised labour that there is a new ball game and the government which interfered in labour practices for political reasons is no longer in place.
10. Instead of sticking to its guns there has been, as a negotiator said last week, a "ghost-like" presence from the government.
Some senior ANC members are being mealy-mouthed about the whole affair.
11. There is a growing impatience with what is seen as labour's apparent willingness to

sabotage the future of individual business and ultimately the economy in pure self-interest

Karl Von Holdt - Cape Times [20.6.95]

12. The state can help protect workers' basic rights

13. Innes likens my argument for decisive state regulation of the workplace to the "compulsion and jackboots of apartheid" and to car hijacking.

Financial Mail, [23.6.95]

14. Principles at stake

15. Demands for the closed shop and open-ended strike rights tend to trample underfoot any notions of democracy and individual rights.

16. Labour claims...In short, "employers want to keep us in the apartheid era of unilateral 'management prerogative' and union bashing."

17. "The velvet glove of reasonableness has been taken off to reveal the iron fist of kragdadigheid with which they run their companies," charges labour.

18. That the demands themselves - minimum wage, compulsory collective bargaining, closed shop - are being made is not the real problem. What is frightening is that some of them may not be mere tactical devices but a reflection of sincere romantic socialism among far too many unionists and politicians.
If the legislation is made flaccid through compromise, the dragon will simply have to be fought later.

Kevin Davie - Sunday Times [25.6.95]

19. Labour fails to win Mboweni's support

20. "The Minister showed that government was prepared to face down its alliance partners," says one participant.

Business Day [26.6.95]

21. Testing the alliance

22. First, however, Mboweni deserves a pat on the back for facing down the demand of his alliance partner that centralised bargaining be made compulsory.

Bruce Cameron - Cape Times [27.6.95]

23. Labour law dispute promises to turn into a rough match

24. A crashing of the titans; deception; dummy passes; frontal attacks; crash tackles; tough referee calls; the occasional foul. A description of the Rugby World Cup final? Not at all. That was mild stuff compared with what is going on in the disputes over the government's planned labour relations reforms.

25. Labour and business used some dirty scrummaging tactics with a one-day stayaway and assurances that business will take a six-month strike.
More importantly, the referee, Labour Minister Tito Mboweni, who was starting to look more like a linesman, arrived on the field and appeared prepared to apply some rules.
26. First to arrive was the embattled chief facilitator, Jayendra Naidoo, of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac). Business negotiators Adrian Du Plessis and Bokkie Botha were next to arrive. Then came the heavyweights, who had been called in to rescue negotiations - major industry figures and the presidents and general secretaries of the trade union federations.

Bruce Cameron - Cape Time [29.6.95] 1995

27. Mandela briefed on labour bill

28. Meanwhile, a final round of make-or-break negotiations between the government, organised labour and organised business is scheduled to resume this week.

Jim Smith - Cape Times [30.2.95]

29. Will the ANC hyena outsmart the jackal?

30. Business and labour have indeed managed to get Mboweni to hold the pole and to attract the lightning at the centre of what has been the main political storm of the year.
There are two good reasons why this storm has become so noisy.

Bruce Cameron - Cape Times [11.7. 1995]

31. Labour is no knife-wielding tsotsi, says Mboweni

32. "We are in injury time and South Africans are well-known for scoring in injury time."
[Mboweni]

..

33. He [Mboweni-DB] saw his role as a referee, favouring neither business nor labour.

Thabo Leshilo and Ross Herbert - Cape Times [18.7.95]

34. Nedlac will recommend bill to Cabinet

35. Business and labour both expressed strong reservations about certain aspects of the draft, but said they were not sufficient to derail the process.

"The question is, are we capable of rowing in the same direction?

I don't know what the answer to that is. None of our reservations are aimed at stopping the process," said Sam Shilowa, the general secretary of Cosatu.

Appendix 2

A MODEL FOR NEGOTIATION

