Disease Metaphors in Urban Planning

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that metaphor is a salient feature of discourse, with a two-fold function. Firstly, it helps make complex issues understandable to the public, and secondly, it helps promote and legitimize the ideological viewpoints of particular groups. The main aim of this paper is to look into the Plan for Restoring the Islamic Wall in Barri del Carme (València, 2002) to show how the authors of the plan use metaphors to mystify the reality and to illustrate the discursive resistance expressed by residents and residents' associations. We will shed new light on how conventionalized metaphors are commonly accepted as natural ways of naming a reality, and therefore function as a powerful device for mystifying the reality. In contrast, (one-shot) image metaphors and less conventionalized linguistic metaphors, are not pervasive in all kinds of discourses, are not natural ways of naming a reality and can lead to discursive subversion.

Keywords: disease metaphors, urban planning, mystification, gentrification

1. Introduction

As linguist and as resident of an area of the old city which is undergoing a process of gentrification I became interested in metaphors when I realized that they are often used to mystify the impact some redevelopment processes will have upon the affected residents. The *Plan for Restoring the Islamic Wall in Barri del Carme*' (Valencia, Spain), for instance, allows to show how disease metaphors function as a powerful device in constructing consensus and masking reality. The project, which was supposedly aimed at restoring the Islamic wall and at the construction of some houses and public facilities, affected 200 people (40% of the population of the area) and included the demolition of 16 buildings and the re-use of 17 construction sites. However, the real goal of the plan was to redevelop a residential area into a tertiary one by getting rid of the residents. The affected inhabitants, who were neither consulted nor informed of the plan while it was being drafted, gathered in associations, organized debates and round tables, launched awareness-raising campaigns for the citizens, wrote press articles and proposed an alternative plan that was sustainable and respectful towards both cultural heritage and neighbourhood. Eventually, in 2004, the plan was withdrawn and a new plan was put forward, which is respectful to most of the existing buildings and spares the population. However, at the moment, the only activity that can be seen in the affected area is that of the real estate agencies, who buy entire buildings, try to throw the inhabitants out through some *estate mobbing* and resell these buildings for twice or three times the original purchase price.

In the following sections I focus on how architects and urban planners try to mystify a reality by means of metaphors. The data for this study consists of the urban project outlined by the technical specialists; opinion articles from

newspapers published from 2003 to 2005; round tables where architects, urban planners, archaeologists and residents have discussed the project, and leaflets from campaigns organized by the residents' associations. These discourses are analyzed through a combination of Critical Discourse Analyses (i.e. Fairclough 1992, 1995, 1998, 2003) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory as used in cognitive linguistics (i.e. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2002; Steen 1999).

This study differs from other research projects on metaphor relying on Conceptual Metaphor Theory where I adopt a language-in-use approach to metaphor, where metaphors *occur naturally* and language users are an integral part of the research. I insist on how metaphors are used to subtly convey a particular ideology as well as on the interactional aspects of metaphors to shed light on how more-or-less conventionalized metaphors are processed by speakers, since some scholars have pointed to the need to distinguish degrees of familiarity in metaphors processed by speakers (i.e., Giora and Fein 1996; Low 1999).

2. Metaphors, thought and ideology

For a long time metaphors were seen as a rhetorical device and more specifically as a matter of poetry. Today, however, many cognitive linguists and analysts of discourse recognize that metaphors play a central role in thought and structure our perception and understanding of reality. Some mental thoughts are so difficult to describe in words that language users often use metaphors to convey their ideas. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for instance, point out that many abstract topics that are central to our existence, such as love and death, are known and understood through metaphors by setting a link between two semantic areas or domains: the *source domain*, typically concrete, and the *target domain* or the domain we talk of metaphorically, typically abstract. Thus, when we use a *conceptual metaphor* such as HAPPY IS UP (in the metaphor literature, small capitals are used to label conceptual metaphors) we are mapping ideas from the source domain of upward direction (and movement) onto the target domain of emotion. The relationship between metaphorical thinking and speaking is often described by saying that conceptual metaphors such as HAPPY IS UP are realized by *linguistic metaphors* such as 'I am feeling up'. Linguistic metaphors are in turn used as evidence for the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors.

On the other hand, metaphors are also seen by some scholars as potentially ideological and many of them have analyzed texts in which metaphors are used to convey a particular interpretation of the situation or event. This ideological component stems from the fact that a metaphor by its nature sets an equation between the metaphorical and literal meaning that does not actually exist and even though the two meanings must resemble each other, they are not identical (Low 1988) and some aspects of the topic are inevitably lost. Thus, very often, language users draw upon metaphors to deliberately present a biased view of a situation or event. Researchers, who are concerned with the effects of metaphors, do not suggest that reality can be 'accessed directly' but they claim that metaphors should not be accepted uncritically; rather, their inferences should be made explicit, and then challenged and

alternative metaphors should be explored (Reddey and Mey, upon Deignan 2005: 24). In this paper I will highlight how some metaphors are used to present a particular message, hide some aspects of a reality and convey a particular ideology. My key research questions are: what are the metaphors used by speakers involved in some redevelopment processes? What are the entailments of these metaphors? What ideology do they reflect? What role do metaphors play in the construction of arguments? And what role do metaphors play in interaction?

3. *Metaphors we live by*

Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power, and people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 159-160). One of the most salient metaphors *we live by* is the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR which is why we often talk about arguments in terms of war. Although there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle and the structure of an argument (attack, defence and counterattack) reflects this. Another salient metaphor *we live by* is the health metaphor, which is when we speak about abstract concepts in terms of body and health and, therefore, we map onto these concepts some properties of animates or human beings, thus personifying them in some way. But the most interesting thing is that both metaphors, the war metaphor and the health metaphor, have been related to each other for a long time. In the 19th and 20th centuries, for instance, medicine evoked military metaphors against disease to promote the idea that illness is an *enemy* to be *defeated* and to engage people in a common cause, namely, in a treatment focused on medications. Sontag (1989), on the other hand, gathers an abundant supply of examples on the way we speak about illness in terms of war and shows how doctors, in their *crusade against cancer* and in order to *kill the cancer*, *bombard with toxic rays* and *chemical warfare*. And vice versa, in his study on the role of metaphors in the Gulf War, Lakoff showed how military *operations* are seen as *hygienic*, as a means *to clean out* fortifications, and bombs are portrayed as *surgical strikes* to take out anything that can serve a military purpose (Lakoff 1991). Both metaphors, the war metaphor and the health metaphor, are still alive in our culture and have an important role in understanding complex matters such as foreign policy.

The health metaphor is also drawn upon to talk about social problems. Fairclough (1989: 120), for instance, has pointed out how disease metaphors are frequently used to speak about social unrest portraying the status quo situation as the healthy situation and presenting other interests as attacks on the health of society as a whole. According to him:

> The ideological significance of disease metaphors is that they tend to take dominant interests to be the interests of society as a whole, and construe expressions of non-dominant interests (strikes, demonstrations and 'riots') as undermining (the health of) society *per se*.

And he concludes that 'different metaphors imply different ways of dealing with things: one does not arrive at a negotiated settlement with cancer, though

one might with an opponent in an argument. Cancer has to be eliminated, cut out'.

In the following section I will specifically show how disease metaphors are used in urban planning in Spain to hide a social change, namely, a process of redevelopment of a neglected area — which is generally labelled as *gentrification* in English and as *sanitizing* in Spanish (*sanear*) and Catalan (*sanejar*) — and to create consensus about it.

4. Disease metaphors

Conceptual metaphors are grounded in, or motivated by, human experience. It is claimed in Conceptual Metaphor Theory that we talk about mental processes in terms of physical experience and that the metaphors we use to speak about mental processes are motivated by bodily experience. What is more, according to Boers (1997: 49), when there are various metaphors available to conceive an abstract concept:

> The likelihood of a given source domain being used for metaphorical mapping may be enhanced when it becomes more salient in everyday experience. Although bodily experience is probably the most basic source domain for metaphor, people's awareness of their bodies may vary as well. One circumstance under which the awareness of one's bodily functioning is enhanced is when it starts malfunctioning, i.e. when one becomes ill.

In the project of the restoration of the Islamic wall in València, for instance, the health metaphor arises as a powerful device to persuade people both of the advantages and disadvantages of the plan, and technicians and institutional representatives used this metaphor both to defend and attack the project. The pro-project technicians, for example, established a doctor/patient relationship (and therefore, an expert/non expert relationship) with the affected environment to justify the *urban operation*. This way, the proposed plan is seen in example (1) as a therapeutic solution, namely as *sanitizing* by means of *delicate urban surgery*, although it entails the demolition of several buildings and the expulsion/eviction of their inhabitants:[1]

> (1)
> a. La reordenación supone el *saneamiento* de una zona en declive social y económico mediante una *intervención delicada de cirugía urbana* que respeta y completa la edificación existente. (Project. *Modificación del PEPRI del Carmen en el ámbito de la muralla musulmana*, 2002)
>
> b. The redistribution suggests the *sanitizing* of a district in social and economic decline through the *delicate application of urban surgery* that both respects and adheres to the existing environs.

The anti-project technicians also use the health metaphor, but this time, to make the affected residents aware of the consequences of the *operation*, namely, the expulsion of the affected inhabitants and the redevelopment of the neighbourhood into a tertiary area. For them, the project is seen as a matter of *major surgery* in (2), and more specifically as a *lineal metastasis* which entails *extirpation* and *amputation* of urban tissue in (3).

(2)

a. Pero es que además yo creo que viajan poco. Mejor dicho, viajan mal. Porque no son capaces de ver y de aprender lo que sucede en el resto de Europa donde ya hace algunos años se ha abandonado casi completamente las *operaciones de cirugía mayor*, la reestructuración contundente, una forma de intervenir que no es un caso aislado y que se ha aplicado de forma contundente todavía mayor cabe en el Cabañal. (Fernando Gaja, anti-project, round table)

b. But, in addition, I think they travel little, or rather are bad travelers. They are incapable of seeing and learning from what is happening in the rest of Europe where, some years ago, the idea of *operations of major surgery* was almost completely abandoned. That is to say, a restructuring on an overwhelming scale, a widespread form of intervention that has been employed with drastic effects in the Cabañal.

(3)

a. Que aunque no se diga, la estrategia aplicada se basa en la llamada hipótesis de la *metástasis de línea* que formuló hace tiempo ya Oriol Bohigas. Una reestructuración *traumática*, de *amputación* y *extirpación* de tejidos urbanos. (Fernando Gaja, anti-project, round table)

b. Although it is not acknowledged, the applied strategy is based on what is known as the *lineal metastasis* formulated in the 1950s by Oriol Bohigas, which consists of a *traumatic* restructuring, *amputation* and *extirpation* of urban tissues.

In example (4), the same anti-project representative maps the health metaphor onto the affected residents, who are referred to as *patients*.

(4)

a. Para los urbanistas más preclaros se trata de una *operación quirúrgica* que pretende matar al *paciente*'. Ese *paciente* son el centenar de familias que tendrán que ser expropiadas de sus casas y la destrucción del tejido económico y social que mantiene vivo el barrio del Carmen. (Reported speech from the Newspaper *Pueblo*)

b. For the more enlightened and eminent urbanists it is about a *surgical operation* that tries to kill the *patient*. The *patient*, in this case, being the hundred families who would have their houses expropriated and would witness the destruction of the economic and social fabric that keeps the Barrio del Carmen (old town) alive.

Thus, recontextualization of medical discourse into urban planning discourse means that the planned urban intervention can be perceived, on one hand, as a necessary measure to be taken, but also, on the other hand, as an operation that can *kill the patient* and the square. It depends on the metaphors used to define the plan. Therefore, even though groups with different interests share the health metaphor at a general level, they exploit it differently at the level of detail.

5. *Conceptual metaphors and image metaphors*

As I mentioned above, when one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another conceptual domain, we have a conceptual metaphor. These metaphors can be more or less conventionalized, and the boundaries between innovative (or creative) and conventionalized metaphors are fuzzy. Many of the metaphorical expressions we have talked about so far are fixed by convention and are examples of conventionalized metaphors or of what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call *metaphors we live by*. This is the case for the linguistic metaphor *sanitizing*, which is used in urban planning to label the redevelopment of a neglected area by increasing the rents and getting rid of the residents or, in corporate discourse, to design the process of increasing gains by getting rid of employees, for instance. Although the real goal in both cases is the wish to increase gains, the aim is seen as therapeutic solutions to a disease in which the unhealthy situation is taken for granted: when we talk in terms of sanitizing, we are presupposing that something or somebody is unhealthy or sick and has to be cured. The following cartoon, for instance, uses humour to unmask this entailment.

Figure 1. 'When I hear them talking about sanitizing an enterprise I get sick'

From the newspaper El País, 16-2-2007

Other metaphors like *extirpation*, *amputation*, *metastasis* and *kill the patient*, for instance, which are drawn upon to refer to the redevelopment of the area, are extensions of what we call the health metaphor, they are emergent metaphors, they are more creative and their use is limited to certain texts, contexts or speakers. These emergent or active metaphors are more pragmatic, since they are highly dependent on the context and have to do with language use and users within specific contexts.

In addition to these cases, which are part of whole metaphorical systems, there are also metaphors that are not based on the conventional mapping of one conceptual system onto another, but rather on one mental image being superimposed on another by virtue of their similar appearance. They are therefore referred to by the scholars as (*one-shot*) *image metaphors*, since, through them, we bring into correspondence two rich images for a temporary purpose on a particular occasion.[2] A popular example is when we say that a woman has an hourglass figure, which involves mapping the image of an

hourglass onto the image of a woman, fitting the middle of the hourglass to her waist (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 89-91). I have found in the data some image metaphors. The most salient and controversial one is, without a doubt, the use of an ecological disaster in Galicia, namely, the use of the word *chapapote* ('tar') to refer to the buildings leaning against the Islamic wall, as in (5).[3]

(5)
a. Esto solo se conseguirá con un cambio de imagen que se quite de encima el *chapapote* de la marca desarrollista y que busque el acuerdo de lo — necesariamente— actual con un pasado que hoy apenas se adivina. (Juan Pecourt, pro-project, Levante-EMV, 16-2-2003)

b. This will only be achieved through a change of image which does away with the *tar* of the 'developmental brand' and which strives for a link between the (necessarily) current moments with an ever-more distant past.

Another instance of what I see as an example of image metaphor is the use of the phrase *song of protest* in (6) to describe the residents' claims, and therefore highlighting the idea that they are behind the times or are against progress.

(6)
a. Ha habido más reacciones: aguiluchos dibujados en las paredes que acechan a los vecinos, una falla que critica a la Administración con resonancias de *canción de protesta* de Ana Belén, llamadas al 'No nos moverán' etc. (Juan Pecourt, pro-project, Levante-EMV, 16-2-2003)

b. There has been more reaction: drawings on the walls with hawks threatening the residents, a 'falla' (papier-mâché satirical figure) criticizing the administration with echoes of Ana Belén's protest song, with its calls of 'We shall not be moved', etc.

Both metaphors are examples of what Steen (1999: 94) calls *degrading metaphors*. But the most interesting one-shot image metaphors are those used in urban planning discourse to hide the destruction of the urban layout. It is well known that redevelopments of neglected areas often lead to the demolition of buildings and the destruction of the urban layout by opening broader spaces. However, there is a strong regulation that forbids such destructive processes in the old town quarters, as these quarters are the history of the city and have to be protected in order to preserve the collective memory. Thus, urban planners will try to avoid words such as *destruction* or *demolition*, and instead of these, they use metaphors like *esponjar* ('*sponge*'). Example (7) is very interesting as the speaker, an anti-project representative, unravels these strategies of naming which aim at masking a reality.

(7)
a. Que normalmente la confusión terminológica es síntoma de una confusión más grande. Las propuestas que se han hecho en Valencia, y también en Barcelona, de donde viene el modelo, se presentan a menudo como *esponjamientos*. No lo son en absoluto. A pesar de que se ha evitado la asunción de un término que las pueda identificar y definir, creo que este tipo de

actuaciones se podrían agrupar bajo la denominación de *reestructuración.* (Fernando Gaja, anti-project, round table)
b. Normally, terminological confusion is symptomatic of more far-reaching confusion. The proposals for Valencia, like those for Barcelona, where they originated, are often described as *spongings*. But they are absolutely not. Although these operations have proved resistant to a general identification and definition, I think that these types of projects can be labelled as *restructuring.*

The essence of a metaphor is that by mapping one concept or image onto another it necessarily highlights some meanings and hides some others, since metaphors set an equation between two meanings that resemble each other but are not identical. Thus, by using the word *esponjar,* for instance, architects and urban planners do not give an accurate picture of the topic, since this metaphor foregrounds the idea or process of opening spaces, which is congruent with the metaphor of the sponge, but hides the destruction of the historical urban layout and the eviction of the residents that often precedes such processes, which is not congruent with the meaning of the metaphor (the sponge). In other words, urban metaphors, like other metaphors, can hide aspects of reality, by highlighting some contents and backgrounding some others. But in the area of urban planning metaphors matter more, because they constrain our lives and can lead to dehumanized neighbourhoods, to quarters without residents, mostly called *tertiary areas.*

6. The effect of metaphors

If metaphors structure the way we think and the way we act, it is reasonable to assume that metaphors play a central role in the construction of social reality and therefore they can change reality and construct consensus or public opinion. However, in my point of view, there are some differences in the way we perceive metaphors. Conventionalized metaphors (called *inactive metaphors* or *dead metaphors,* Goatly 1997) are commonly assumed to be natural ways of naming a reality, as they are pervasive in all sorts of discourses and all languages. On the contrary, most (one-shot) image metaphors are not perceived as natural ways of naming since, through them, we bring into correspondence two rich images for a temporary purpose on a particular occasion. Therefore, these kinds of metaphors are more likely to lead to a discursive subversion. This is the case of the innovative metaphors *song of protest* and *tar* drawn upon to describe the protest actions carried out by the residents and the affected buildings, respectively. These metaphorical expressions led to the reactions in (8) and (9)

(8)
a. Al contrari, per part de l'equip redactor a la participació veïnal se li va anomenar *cançó de protesta*, a les accions de veïns (...) 'aldarull al carrer' i davant la defensa legítima de les llars dels ciutadans se li va denominar *finques de xapapote*, i que no mereixien ser conservades (Josep Montesinos, anti-project, affected resident, Levante-EMV, 28-2-2004)

b. To the contrary, the editing team dismissed the neighbours' actions as *songs of protest*, their legitimate right to defend their houses as 'riots' , and their

buildings were described as *tar*, fit only for demolition and not worth preserving.

(9)
a. Se ha llegado a utilizar el término *chapapote* para definir esas construcciones posteriores, término que quiere buscar un paralelo —desde nuestro punto de vista desafortunado— en otro problema totalmente distinto. (Press announcement from the 'Colegio de arqueólogos' of Valencia)

b. The term *tar* has now come to be used to define those later constructions, a term that searches to find a parallel — and from our point of view, not an appropriate one — with a totally different problem.

And the same happened in the case of extensions of disease metaphors such as *delicate surgery*. While the term *sanitizing* is assumed as a natural way of naming the redevelopment of a quarter or building, the expression *delicate surgery* had a subversive effect and aroused a set of discursive reactions, as shown in (10), where the speaker makes a claim for a *minor surgery*; or in (3) (see above), where the plan was seen as a *lineal metastasis*.

(10)
a. Somos conscientes de la mayor dificultad gestora, que no económica, que implica optar por la *cirugía menor* y el diálogo y compromiso de los vecinos (Miguel Ángel Piqueras, anti-project, Residents' association 'Amics del Carme', Levante-EMV, 21-02-2004)

b. We are aware of the major management challenge, -and not economic in nature-, implied in opting for *minor surgery* and dialoguing with residents and gaining their support

Example (11) is very interesting since when the authors of the plan refer to the project in terms of *surgery*, they are taking up the role of an expert, the surgeon, while the affected residents are given the role of patients and, therefore, are implicitly portrayed as non-experts. Thus, when the speaker in (11), an affected resident, subtly calls the authors of the plan *butchers* he is degrading them to the role of a non-expert.

(11)
a. Se trata de trabajar con el *bisturí*, con el cincel, y dejar para otros menesteres el *cuchillo del carnicero* (Jorge Palacios, anti-project, Levante-EMV)

b. It is about working with the *scalpel*, with the *chisel*, and putting the *butcher's knife* aside for other tasks.

Summing up, instead of constructing consensus, one-shot image metaphors like '*chapapote*' (tar) or less conventionalized metaphors such as *delicate surgery* can have a subversive effect as it happens in poetry since the reader does not remain indifferent to the images being mapped. On the other hand, conventionalized metaphors such as *sanitizing* are not contested or reactivated by the opponents to counterattack or show disagreement, as they are seen as natural ways of naming a reality.

¹ The sample is written or spoken either in Spanish or in Catalan. I present the Spanish or Catalan versions in section a) followed by the English translation in section b).

² For cognitive linguists (one-shot) image metaphors are isolated metaphors and therefore they do not play a central role in conceptual organization. But some scholars have pointed out their importance. Semino (2002), for instance, has analyzed a corpus of texts discussing the economic aspects of the European Union and has found out that isolated one-shot image metaphors are the norm.

³ The term *chapapote* refers to the oil spill that reached the coast of Galicia (north-west of Spain) and caused important environmental damage to the coastline.

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