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# METAPHORICAL REPRESENTATION OF LIFE AND WORK IN AN ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Review  
Article

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*Metaphor,  
Work,  
Labour*

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## JEL Classification

*M50, Y80*

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## Abstract

*The present paper represents an introduction in the theory of the conceptual metaphors and the study of metaphors associated to work which appear in economics and economics research literature.*

*More precisely, our paper aims to map metaphors of work and life in the context of labour mobility. We start from the premise that our representations of life and work encapsulated in metaphors that we use daily are in a relationship of interdependence (reciprocal determination) with representations of the organizational context in which we work. We associate the organizational context term directly with an organization/company to which the employer relates at a certain moment, and indirectly with the organization as „organized society at the level of community, state, civil society”.*

## INTRODUCTION

The history, as well as the modern press, provide and underline numerous examples of paradoxical transformation of people's failure in a country into a success outside its borders. Beyond the emblematic figures, belonging to history books, that of common perception and simple employee (not necessarily simple), the general perception is that Romanian employees who emigrated to other labour markets acquire another „position” in terms of work and life in general. Common sense finds them different shortly after immigration. They probably make money differently, do different things in their free time and definitely speak and also behave differently. It is a different „what”, diffuse, difficult to approach mathematically in explicit relations of cause and effect type, but partially open for exploration by means of metaphorical language analysis.

In Romania, studies on metaphorical language in the field of economics were conducted by linguists and philosophers from liberal arts (Dragoş, 2000) or language teachers from Business School (Vasiloaia, Gaisoa & Vergara, 2011). There has been a limited number of studies conducted on this topic. Their number has been increasing in doctoral and post-doctoral programs (Tomoni, 2012).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH FROM THE SCIENTIFIC, TECHNOLOGIC, SOCIO-ECONOMIC OR CULTURAL POINT OF VIEW

The research aims to study the metaphorical language of Romanian and EU employees and to map the identified metaphors, considering that these “language maps” (implicitly “mental maps”) may be used as real management, training and coaching tools. Specialized literature provides solid arguments for metaphor mapping found in everyday language. We provide some of them in what follows. Scarcity, deficit from which we started and that drives our research lies in the fact that few Romanian researchers dealt with the topic of metaphoric language in Romanian related to concepts of life, work, organization and management. People speak metaphorically because they think, feel and behave metaphorically. Formal structures of language are not studied as if they were autonomous but as a reflection of conceptual organization, classification principles and processing mechanisms. (Tendahl & Gibbs Jr., 2008; Gibbs, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In communication and also in management studies, the metaphor beyond its function as a linguistic ornament is not just a figure of speech but a **specific mental mapping** and a form of neuronal that influences the way people think, make

judgments of value, imagine in their everyday life (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). The emphasis falls less on the linguistic aspect of the metaphor. It is placed more on connections among language, thought and action: „the metaphor is mainly a matter of thought and action, and then an issue of language.” Metaphors are matters of language and not matters of thought or action (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

A metaphor is a way of looking at something as if it were something else. It is an analogy. Practically, the metaphor links the known with the unknown. It reveals the *perceived* relation between different things, between a whole and a part. Metaphors are involving the same process that is found in building relationships: the process of establishing meaningful connections between ideas or people, originally separate and distinct entities (Duck, 1994). The metaphor facilitates access to our truths and truths of others, precisely because the perception of truth means detecting an analogy (Robbins, 1991).

When we hear or say: **the company is** „*a second family*”, „*a plantation with slaves*”, „*awful*”, „*taken advantage by ...* “ ; or, **life is** „*a hurdle race*”, „*a gift (priceless or a price we did no task)*”, „*a journey*”, „*a boxing match*”, „*a choice*”, „*a garden*”, „*a ship and I am its captain*”; or, **work is** „*punishment*”, „*a play*”, „*our portrait*”, „*a debt*” „*a drug*” „*power*” etc., we offer and receive information richer in its meaning and understanding than if we provided just technical information for each concept.

More importantly, **metaphor legitimizes action, sets goals, and guides behaviour.** The motivation for using metaphoric language can be found in our sensorimotor patterns, activated by the neuronal process when we think, speak or understand (Tendahl & Gibbs Jr., 2008). Primary conceptual metaphors „*To know means to see*” (Knowing is seeing) or „*To be balanced means to be happy*” (but also „*to be wise*”) originate in our body experiences and are found in metaphorical formulas facilitating the understanding of many areas and abstract concepts. We have, for example, *universities having vision, companies having visions, people having visions, programs having a perspective or a balanced curriculum, balanced development program, balanced balance of payments, area of balance, etc.*

The Palo Alto School (Watzlawick, 1967) imposes as an axiom the fact that *a map is not a territory* (Korzybski, 1990) and that people act using their mental maps and not as a result of a direct relationship with the reality itself. Another mental map, a metaphor itself, is the result of metaphorical mapping of reality. Mapping is mediated by senses and body experiences. In other words, the mind does not have access to reality but by means of senses.

Psychologists, mentors, coaches emphasize the therapeutic and educational dimension of metaphor and its force as an instrument of change and personal development. "A new metaphor has the power to create a new reality. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system underlying our actions, then the conceptual system will be modified (altered) along with perceptions and actions that structured it. „The idea that metaphors can create realities goes against most traditional views of metaphor. The reason is that metaphor has traditionally been viewed as a matter of mere language rather than primarily as a means of structuring our conceptual system and the kinds of everyday activities we perform" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Also, other approaches have shown that metaphors may be used as ideological weapons for creating and recreating economic or political issues.

*Homo narrans* or the story-telling person and the metaphors have always accompanied the economic discourse. If we admit that metaphor is fundamental to language, thought and human experience, then language, thought and human experience in the field of economics can not be an exception. Together with and alongside other sciences, economics uses both the stylistics and the decorative function of metaphor and, if not by choice, its cognitive and creative function.

Approaches to metaphors in the field of economics make a differentiation between „discourse communities". Alejo (2009) notes that economists, on the one hand, and linguists, on the other hand, operate on different levels of analysis of metaphorical language used in economic texts. The economists tend to understand metaphors by relating to a paradigm than to language. Transition that is still in progress from *machine metaphor* to *living body metaphor* is the transition from the mechanistic model of perceiving economic phenomena to homeostasis model which is the result of a path with historical determinations. This is the reason why metaphors of economists are not acknowledged by linguists.

Linguists, on the other side, favor aspects related to discourse generation and its means and functions in economic texts. The attention is focused on communication, social environment and context in which metaphors appear? A distinction between business discourse, business deals and economics as a discipline has also been made. Differences appear also in metaphorical language. In terms of perception, these are seen in the curricula of business schools or if we just look through the Course of Political Economy (for 1st year of undergraduate studies) or Human Resources Management Course (for 3rd year of undergraduate studies): 3rd year students discover that *homo economicus* disappears or is just kept as an unattainable ideal or transforms himself into an

object of irony; *equilibrium* is not just an equation but is consistently explained, for instance, through emotions and aggregated human states.

This diversity of approaches and challenges warns us that it is in general difficult and unproductive in terms of understanding, to speak about metaphorical discourse in economy in general. In addition, various approaches presented in studies on economic discourse (economists versus linguists, for example) do not match business discursive practices. Therefore, we encounter a translation of the mind metaphor as a workshop and the image of the craftsman that „does not get to know the properties of a hammer by enumerating its features, but by using it" (Malița, 2005). World-renowned economists and successful managers build and present their discourse without asking themselves constantly under which analytic umbrella these will be falling.

Taking into account the elements of difficulty of this research, we remember that „the mind provides different answers to the same question whenever ambient conditions vary (Luca & Ciobanu, 2016). Accuracy does not prevail but the approximation, not the absolute clarity but the ambiguity." (M. Malița, 2005). There is a great benefit of not giving a final answer and drawing the curtain down. „It does not stop the interrogation but keep it alive" (A. Pleșu, 2012).

#### **THE LIMITS OF THE CURRENT APPROACHES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STATE OF THE ART IN THE FIELD**

Metaphors of work and life do not belong just to the field of economics. Researchers from different areas of study seem to be fascinated by the subtle force of metaphors. W. Henderson (1982), D. McCloskey (1983), Mirowski (1989) were the first economists who studied the topic of metaphors in the field of economics. Sarcastic in his view, McCloskey, D.N. (1995) states that „*economists are poets without knowing it*". Even more, studies on metaphors used in the field of economics have grown enough to allow us to talk about „western metamorphosis" (Vasiloaia *et al.*, 2011). We can easily find research on metaphorical language in advertising, economic press, CSR communication, discourses of CEOs and prime-ministers, main founding texts of economics as a discipline, training materials for different business areas etc.

To study metaphors, perceived as an instrument for understanding change, main references belong to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1992), Kövecses, Z., (2010), Morgan (1996). In the field of economics, main studies are those of McCloskey (1985), Putnam (1999), White, M., (2004), Rojo López, Orts Llopis (2010).

Main studies evaluating metaphorical language in the field of economics have Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American origin. There are also many comparative studies between the English-speaking countries and other countries (Rojo López & Orts Llopis, 2010 – for Spanish-speaking countries; Fukuda, 2009 – for Japanese; Bratož, 2004 – for Slovenian etc.). It is justified to refer to Anglo-Saxon world and English-speaking countries as they provide the source of a significant part of economic vocabulary. Studies on metaphorical language investigate the way in which the terms have borrowed their original meaning and acquired new meanings when they were translated into another language or culture.

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