

The Metaphor Is the Message: Reconsidering Word Use for Today's Security Environment

Josh Kerbel

December 5, 2017

Linguistic metaphors are mental models. The IC must identify and use appropriately “organic” ones if it is ever going to think realistically about—and potentially anticipate—the emergent dynamics of the increasingly complex security environment. Too often, analysts use outdated “mechanistic” metaphors better suited to a previous era.

When many IC officers think about language, often the first thing that comes to their minds—for obvious reasons—is foreign languages. Much less often they think about their own language, especially their too often sloppy use of commonly employed terms such as “strategic” and “complexity.”¹ And even rarer than that is any consideration of their commonly employed metaphors—the often unrecognized linguistic devices by which one’s understanding of one thing is enhanced by seeing it in terms of another.

Consider a few examples: the Iron Curtain; the Cold War; containment; nation-building; and the War on Drugs. Even this short list demonstrates what a central and powerful role metaphors play in the national security discourse. Indeed, many are now so widely accepted and used that they are no longer even recognized as metaphors. These “dead metaphors” are often so deeply ingrained (like the term “ingrained” here) that they tend to rise above scrutiny.³ Moreover—and worse—they too easily get repurposed and misapplied to new and fundamentally different issues.

This would not matter if metaphors were “just” figures of speech or “merely” matters of semantics—a status to which they are often mistakenly relegated. But they are not. To the contrary, metaphors are key to one’s thinking in that they are nothing less than mental models.⁴ If the IC employs a bad metaphor, it has a bad mental model. The IC then potentially, and perhaps even likely, sets itself and its clients up for misunderstanding, confusion, and surprise.

With that in mind, the IC needs to take a deeper look at the metaphors that have long dominated its (and, to be fair, the larger national security establishment’s) discourse: inertia, momentum, tension, leverage, stability, trajectory, center of gravity, and friction. These terms are borrowed from Newtonian mechanics. They made for useful metaphors when applied to the behavioral dynamics of the USSR (closed, clear-edged, hierarchical, top-down) or Cold War (a largely two-body problem), both of which tended to behave according to the rules of Newtonian mechanics.⁵ That is to say linearly and predictably.

Merriam-Webster defines **dead metaphor** as “a word or phrase (such as *time is running out*) that has lost its metaphoric force through common usage.”² Some terms that are frequently used by analysts are no longer recognized as metaphors—but they are. Consequently, they reflect, reinforce, and shape our thinking. For example, use of the word *trajectory* to describe the future course of a nation causes us to expect predictable or linear change—whether we realize it or not.



However, by 1992, the USSR/Cold War order had collapsed, China had begun to rapidly open up, and—perhaps most importantly—the World Wide Web/Internet had taken off. This resulted in the strategic environment becoming much more interconnected (complex), and those linear metaphors became considerably more problematic. At that point, the national security landscape of the United States became significantly less discrete and much more networked, meaning that the behavioral dynamics of its features became much less mechanistic. The new security environment was accompanied by all the behavioral unpredictability associated with living beings rather than the predictability of machines. It demanded new, more organic mental models—drawing, for example, from the life and environmental sciences—to effectively accommodate the increased uncertainty associated with living things.

• Trajectory	• Leverage/Levers	• Recoil
• Tension	• Backlash	• Shape
• Inertia	• Linchpin	• (Security) Vacuum
• Momentum	• Pivot	• Stability
• Uni/Bi/Multi-polar	• Center of Gravity	• Friction
• (Strategic) Balance (of Power)	• Brace	• Link/Linkage

Unfortunately, the IC’s continued use of legacy metaphors, especially when applied to the broader strategic environment, has just reinforced its old and now unrealistic mindsets and expectations. In particular, those Newtonian metaphors are fortifying the IC’s assumptions and expectations that today’s security environment will demonstrate the same attractive, linear attributes—reducibility; clear cause and effect; repeatability; and proportionality of input/output—that characterized the Cold War environment and gave it a comforting manageability and predictability.⁶ In turn, it is no wonder that the IC is readily perplexed (think Arab Spring) by this new, much less manageable or predictable security environment, characterized by emergent behaviors quite different from those of the previous era.

Given this, if the IC is ever to think realistically about—never mind anticipate—the behavioral dynamics of this new environment, it will need to start describing that environment more accurately. It will need to use metaphors drawn from more organic disciplines such as meteorology, biology, ecology, and epidemiology.

Interestingly, there was a scholarly discussion about this issue (some of it is cited herein) just beginning to take off in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Unfortunately, 9/11 relegated it, and so many other important discussions, to the same warehouse as Indiana Jones’s lost ark. It is long past time that the IC pull the discussion out and give it its appropriate due.

• Risk Factors	• Vulnerability	• Virulence
• Acute/Chronic	• Diagnosis/Prognosis	• Toxicity
• Side Effects	• Immunity	• Fog
• Ripeness	• Contagion	• Dormant
• Susceptibility	• Symptomatic	• Evolutionary

This might not be quite as hard as it sounds. Possibly due to some growing implicit awareness that today’s highly interconnected security dynamics do, in fact, behave quite differently, there are glimmers of such organic metaphors (e.g., viral ideas, policy side effects, and economic contagion) beginning to appear in the IC’s quiver of metaphors. Though certainly a positive development, such organic metaphors unfortunately still appear to be rarer than the mechanistic ones, which seemingly remain the default.

That said, the IC should not kid itself that this will be easy. Discussion of this topic in countless analytic training courses suggests that intelligence officers, even when they understand and accept the need for new metaphors, will often seek a distinct replacement term that can simply be swapped out for an old metaphor. But thoughtful change does not take place that way. Since it is not just a matter of terms—but also concepts—it is almost always necessary to think more deliberately and then change the larger text so it accurately portrays the concept in question. Moreover, it is common for editors and other reviewers, when encountering these new metaphors, to see them as awkward and to try to change them back to older, more familiar—but less suitable—terms.

Developing and using truly appropriate metaphors can and will be challenging. It takes real attention to what is too often automatic. It is important to consider if a metaphor—no matter how commonly employed or normal it sounds—truly reflects one’s understanding of the issue to which it is applied. If an old metaphor works for an issue—fine, use it. But familiar terminology, however comfortable, must not be permitted to undermine sound thinking.

In sum, the IC needs to constantly ask itself what it is really trying to say and then use metaphors appropriate to the case. For only by doing this will the IC stop allowing its traditional and comfortable language to put words in its mouth and—worse—poorly conceived thoughts in its head.

ICOD: November 28, 2017

Josh Kerbel is a member of the research faculty at NIU. He writes frequently about the future of intelligence.

If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a Research Short topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at NIU_OOR@dodiiis.mil.

Table 3: Conceptual Distinctions Between Mechanical (Linear) and Organic (Nonlinear) Metaphors

Linear	Nonlinear
Analytic	Synthetic
Being	Becoming
Clockwork Precision	Open-ended Unfolding
Closed System	Open System
Deterministic	Deterministically Chaotic
Equilibrium	Perpetual Novelty
Individualistic	Collective
Order	Disorder
Pre-designed	Emergent
Predictable	Unpredictable
Reductionist	Holistic
Solution	Process and Adaptation
Stability	“Edge of Chaos”
Top-Down	Bottom-Up and Top-Down

Endnotes

¹ “Stop Using ‘Strategic’ To Mean Everything Under the Sun,” Defense One, accessed June 1, 2017, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/10/stop-using-strategic-mean-everything-under-sun/132790/>.

² *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “dead metaphor,” accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

³ Alan D. Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Importance of Imagery,” in *Complexity, Global Politics, and National Security*, ed. David S. Alberts et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1997), 163.

⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3-6.

⁵ Steven R. Mann, “Chaos Theory and Strategic Thought,” *Parameters* (Autumn 1992): 54-68.

⁶ Thomas J. Czerwinski, *Coping with the Bounds* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2008), 8-9.

⁷ Adapted from Andrew Illichinski, *Land Warfare and Complexity, Part II: An Assessment of the Application of Nonlinear Dynamic and Complex System Theory to the Study of Land Warfare* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 1996), 52.