



On the Front Line? Metaphors of War and Violence in Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Is there room for war metaphor in academic libraries? Is there a good, or justifiable, reason for its use? In this paper, we argue the answer to these questions is no. The paper will discuss the nature of metaphor in general, the effects of its use, and why those effects matter. Grounded in this discussion, it will consider and analyze the use of war metaphor, specifically in the academic library world. Finally, it will offer suggestions for how, through individual and collective effort, the metaphor of war might be purged from the academic library lexicon.

Keywords: *academic libraries · language · violence · war metaphor*

RÉSUMÉ

La métaphore guerrière a-t-elle une place dans les bibliothèques universitaires? A-t-on une bonne raison d'y recourir? Cette contribution répond aux deux questions par la négative. Le texte définira dans un premier temps la métaphore et exposera son fonctionnement ainsi que ses manifestations. Suivra ensuite une analyse de l'usage de la métaphore guerrière dans le contexte précis des bibliothèques universitaires. Enfin, les auteurs expliqueront comment, à travers un effort individuel et collectif, les interactions bibliothécaires peuvent être expurgées de leurs contenus belliqueux.

Mots-clés : *bibliothèques universitaires · langage · métaphore guerrière · violence*

A dozen academic librarians sit round a table discussing how to trim the budget, for which the outlook is dire. Some librarians offer suggestions; others challenge them in return.

After an hour, without consensus reached, the chairperson says: *At some point we'll just have to pull the trigger.*

As part of its website redesign process, a librarian working group has invited colleagues to an information meeting. Someone asks when the new site will be completed. The group leader responds: *We plan to do a stealth launch next month.*

In a seminar room, librarians take notes at a workshop on management skills. Today's topic is about conducting effective performance evaluations. The librarian presenter steps into the crowd and announces: *If you're responsible for writing performance reviews, you've got to gather ammunition all year.*

Though the details of these scenarios are somewhat altered, the utterances within them are not. They exemplify dozens of metaphors of war and violence—gleaned over the past fifteen years—from the academic library world. That world comprises graduate library studies, conferences and continuing education, library literature, and the many-faceted library workplace itself.

Like other professions, academic librarianship has its lingo—the professional shorthand that makes communication between peers quick and easy: accession numbers and authority control, bibliographic records and Boolean operators, classification systems and circulation stats. IL and ILL. OA and OPAC. MARC and MESH. But academic librarians also slip into the language of other professions and paradigms, such as business (customer, outsourcing, stakeholder), technology (end-user, granular, drill down), neoliberalism (excellence, innovation, robust), and, apparently, the military—as these additional examples demonstrate:¹

- *What ideas have you got in your arsenal?*
- *We sure dodged a bullet on that one!*
- *You're in the trenches today? You'll be bombarded by questions!*
- *We'll do a SWOT² analysis of the circulation system.*
- *Once I get a bead on it . . .*
- *We're developing a two-year strategic plan.*
- *Those first year classes are real mine fields.*
- *We'll debrief the workshop at the end of the day.*
- *Me? I just fly under the radar.*
- *There's more than one way to win a war.*

Academic libraries and librarians are not alone in employing war metaphor. Heide points to its use by society in general. It occurs in:

1. All the metaphors of war and violence in this paper derive from the first author's lived professional experience. They are decontextualized to ensure anonymity of person and place.

2. We see SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) as a concerted play on the acronym SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics). In any event, it's a homonym for the word swat, which is to hit or crush something with a flat object.

politics (where states are *battlegrounds*, candidates lead *campaigns*, advertising is an *air war*), medicine (*aggressive* cancer treatment), social policy (the *drug war*, the *war on poverty*), foreign policy (the *war on terror*), law (custody *battles*, *Rambo* tactics), sports (football's terminology of *offense*, *defense*, *blitz*, the long *bomb*, *shotgun* formations), religion (*onward Christian soldiers*), business (takeover *battles*, *fare wars*, corporate *raiders*, *scorched earth policy*), gender (the *battle* of the sexes), and our relation to Nature (the *conquest* of space, the *assault* on Everest). (2010, 68, emphasis in original)

Heide's list above does not include academic librarianship, which is not surprising. In the post-secondary education domain, there is some, if limited, literature on the subject of war metaphor use (Leask 2006; Rees, Knight, and Cleland 2009; Taras 2007). In the academic library world, it is even sparser.³

Criticism has been directed at the proliferation of war metaphor in various domains. Hartmann-Mahmud cautions against the propensity to “[declare] war on a concept” (2002, 427) (e.g., war on drugs, war on over-population), which creates the illusion that there is a single problem (an enemy) with a single solution—to the exclusion of various other factors and implications. It “diverts attention away from the very debates and discussions that are necessary for making inroads into solving the problem” (428); Mitchell, Ferguson-Paré and Richards review the history of military metaphor in nursing, and declare it outmoded. They describe it as “masculine, power-based, patriotic, paternalistic and violent. It is based on command and control and the principles of conquest and conflict” (2003, 55). Colleen McGloin is an Indigenous Studies professor whose university solicited her “to be ‘profiled’ in a faculty humanities brochure as part of ‘recruitment collateral’” (2015, 345). Seeing its connection to *collateral damage*, she critiques the former term as “an insidious reprocessing of language forms that seek to make innocuous, and delete from view their violent histories and political dimensions” (346).

War metaphor is not always deemed entirely problematic. In business, where the “single metaphor most commonly applied to retail competition and strategy is surely that of armed combat and warfare,” (Whysall 2001, 34) use of such language is both promoted (Allard 2004) and viewed with skepticism (Whysall). Beckett suggests that social workers choose metaphors which “provide the best fit against their own experience of the context in which they find themselves” (2003, 627). With respect to war metaphor, that context includes adversarial court proceedings dealing with parents whose children must be taken into care. It also arises from ongoing demands

3. In January 2019, we conducted a search for “war metaphor” in two databases, with no date or document-type limits. Library and Information Science Abstracts yielded 10 results; Library & Information Science Source yielded one (a duplicate). None of these directly related to use of war metaphor in academic libraries. Outside these searches, we found an article *promoting* war metaphor in libraries, which are described as “trenches: places for activism, critical thinking, militancy, and committed action” (Civallero 2016, 2).

that social workers are unable to meet, and to which “a normal reaction is to begin to feel *attacked*” (637, emphasis in original). From a more generalized perspective, Aikin defends the use of war metaphors in argument, as they “reflect [argument’s] intrinsic adversariality” (2011, 270).

Is there room for war metaphor in academic libraries? Is there a good, or justifiable, reason for its use? In this paper, we argue the answer to these questions is no. The paper will discuss the nature of metaphor in general, the effects of its use, and why those effects matter. Grounded in this discussion, it will consider and analyze the use of war metaphor, specifically in the academic library world. Finally, it will offer suggestions for how, through individual and collective effort, the metaphor of war might be purged from the academic library lexicon.

Methodology: Observation to Reflection

The genesis of this paper occurred well over a decade ago, when the first author heard one of the war metaphors noted above; that is, the need to gather ammunition for performance reviews. That chance (and, for her, potent) experience was an impetus neither to engage in formal research, nor to listen intentionally for war metaphors in her work life as an academic librarian; rather, the experience inadvertently tuned in the author to such language, examples of which appeared throughout the course of her professional activities. She simply began to take note of these publicly uttered metaphors of war and violence, including her own. Essentially, this involved a librarian recording and reflecting on her lived professional experience. As such, the process did not comprise planned or formal research. Nonetheless, in retrospect we see that a kind of investigation did transpire, which bears consideration for three reasons: (1) to bring an inadvertent process to the foreground; (2) to reflect on how elements of that process might be applied to heighten awareness of engagement in war metaphor (or any language peculiarities, for that matter); and, therefore, (3) to be better equipped to adjust that engagement. So, we turn retroactively to an examination of this process, and the potential remedies inherent in it.

A few years ago, the first author was in the market for a new car and was quite enchanted by a particular model. She mentioned this to the owner of such a vehicle, noting that she had seen a lot of them on the road. “That,” he replied, “is because you’re interested in buying one.” It was an insightful response, pointing in the direction of *salience*.

According to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, something that is salient is “distinctive or prominent. A salient stimulus in a multielement array will tend to

be easily detected and identified.”⁴ And a salient hypothesis is “a general theory of perception according to which highly salient stimuli (objects, people, meanings, etc.) will be perceived more readily than those of low salience. It has applications in social perception, advertising, and linguistics.”⁵

Our prospective car owner became interested in a particular model—a “highly salient stimulus”—so she noticed it on the road more than models with lower salience. Similarly, it is likely that an evocative war metaphor, heard in her professional world, heightened her awareness of such language, bringing it to the foreground of her attention and perception. Or, as this paper’s sociolinguist co-author explains, “She placed herself in a lexical, semantic field.” Indeed, her interest could have been sparked as easily by a different lingual example—*let’s dialogue about this disconnect going forward*—placing her in the lexical, semantic field of mangled English bureaucratese, and tuning her in to that jargon instead.

In a formal research project, such salience would raise an issue of bias. In this instance, however, it became the impetus for a librarian to notice and deliberate about a practice within her profession, which she perceived as problematic. The focusing nature of salience became the seed for self-examination and personal change, as well as for a desire to share her experience. Essentially, if not precisely, this process involved elements of reflective practice. In her book on the subject, Bassot says:

If you were to look in a standard dictionary for a definition of the word ‘reflection’, you would find at least two groups of words. The first refers to mirror images and the second to the act of deep thinking. In many respects this gives us very helpful clues in relation to what reflective practice is and what it involves. It can be likened to looking into a mirror to see our practice and ourselves more clearly and so give some serious thought or consideration to what we see. (2015, 1)

Since Donald Schön wrote his seminal book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), reflective practice has evolved significantly—so much so that it is difficult to define. However, in a paper that outlines varying—and sometimes controversial—approaches to reflective practice, Finlay offers this summary of its common ground:

... reflective practice is understood as the process of *learning through and from experience* towards gaining *new insights* of self and/or practice.... This often involves *examining assumptions* of everyday practice. It also tends to involve the individual practitioner in being *self-aware* and *critically evaluating* their own responses to practice situations. The point is to recapture practice experiences and mull them over critically in order to gain new understandings and so improve future practice. This is understood as part of the process of *life-long learning*. (2008, 1, emphasis in original)

4. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. (2007) s.v. “salient (adj.),” by Gary R. VandenBos. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

5. *Ibid.* s.v. “salient hypothesis.”

By definition then, reflective practice is generally intentional, individual, and relatively specific. For example, a librarian might engage in concerted and ongoing self-examination and evaluation around his teaching methods, with a view to continual improvement.⁶ The process that resulted in this paper diverges from these particularities in several ways: it was unintentional, it examined and critically evaluated the actions of others as well as self, and—though focused on war metaphor—it encompassed a broad range of situations. In fact, it might be argued that this reflection on the academic library world's use of war metaphor was not a reflection on a “practice” at all. However, we would argue otherwise.

Language is not simply a means of communication. It is also a symbolic order where attitudes, values, and social practice find their foundation. It is through language that physical and cultural objects are produced. Language is the very condition of their possibility. As philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1972) aptly explains, language is not confined to translating a preexisting reality; *it is the field where reality is formed*. For this reason, an academic librarian's reflection on practice would be impoverished, even incredible, without rigorous attention paid to the language used within it. We create our practice—the reality in which we are immersed—literally as we speak.

“Looking into a mirror to see our practice and ourselves more clearly,” as in the quote from Bassot above, can be an individual endeavour. When it comes to language use, we suggest that giving “serious thought or consideration” to what academic librarians reflect collectively is an equally valid endeavour. Indeed, we assert that doing so is imperative—even if it may seem uncomfortable at first glance. As Ghaye notes: “Getting into the reflective mode sets off ripples and the extent of these cannot always be foreseen. In some ways reflective practices might be seen as quite threatening because they invite us to address and resolve some potentially difficult personal, professional and organisational issues” (2000, 6).

What Is Metaphor?

Defining Metaphor

It is virtually impossible to provide a conclusive answer to the question, “What is metaphor?” As Gibbs notes, “Contemporary scholars wishing to understand something about how metaphor is created, understood and applied often find their heads spinning as they try to get a handle on the voluminous literature on the topic” (1999, 29). This plethora of literature derives from an interdisciplinary domain, including, at minimum, literature, linguistics (social and cognitive), sociology,

6. A significant amount of literature on reflective practice is found in such professions as teaching and nursing.

psychology, and social psychology. This makes it particularly challenging to address the issue of war metaphor in the context of academic libraries, which encompasses the added domains of LIS and higher education.

To complicate matters further, Reimer and Camp ask: “What can be said about metaphor that is not controversial?” “Very little, as it turns out,” they say, in response to their own question (2006, 845). Indeed, metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon around which there is much debate. The size and prevalence of the debate is directly proportional to the importance of the phenomenon. Indeed, metaphor matters. As Geary notes, “new research in the social and cognitive sciences makes it increasingly plain that metaphorical thinking influences our attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprising, hidden, and often oddball ways” (2011, 3).

The intent of this paper is not to summarize the huge body of literature around metaphor, or to enter into the debate around it. However, in order to discuss war metaphor, we must first consider metaphor at its base. To do so, we draw from the research and perspectives that best inform that discussion, and which are closest to our own.

Metaphor (from the Greek *metaphora*, meaning carry over or transfer) is one of the most common figures of speech—so common that it has been used to characterize the way language itself functions; that is, the way we language users perceive, imagine and interpret the world in which we live. It is intriguing that so common a trope has a fundamentally perplexing quality, as described by Jean-Jacques Lecercle: “A metaphor is truly false and falsely, or apparently, true” (1990, 148). To illuminate his point, Lecercle gives an example. If we say, “snow is white,” there is no problem. Everyone agrees it makes sense and is syntactically correct. But “snow is red” is equally well formed syntactically and, as a result, it possesses a lingual truth, if not a literal one. Because of this, we are tempted to seek in it a metaphorical interpretation (148).

Indeed, as language speakers, it is virtually impossible to do anything *but*. Glucksberg confirms this, saying “metaphor comprehension is not dependent on a failure to find a context-appropriate literal meaning. Like any other kind of language comprehension, metaphor comprehension is non-optional. Instead it is *mandatory and automatic*” (2003, 93, emphasis added). If we speak a language fluently, we cannot *not* understand what we hear, be it literal or metaphorical.⁷

In the classic sense, metaphor links two terms by analogy, and then substitutes one for the other. It is nothing more than a “word or expression . . . used to communicate a meaning that might have been expressed literally” (Black 1954-55, 280). For example: *My friend Simon is strong. A bear is known to be a strong animal. Simon is*

7. There are exceptions. For example, individuals with autism spectrum disorders often have difficulty decoding, or are unable to decode, metaphorical language (Geary 2011, 44-57).

strong (as a bear). Simon is a bear. However, in modern rhetoric, rather than employing simple word substitution, metaphor refers to modification of a word's meaning; that is, the way we understand it. Steen, acknowledging that defining metaphor is a "theoretically thorny issue" (1997, 60), says a metaphor is "a set of correspondences between two conceptual domains, with linguistic metaphor deriving from conceptual structures. The presence of two domains is intended to capture the fact that we are dealing with nonliteral similarities between entities and relations at some level of analysis" (60). Essentially, Steen is describing *conceptual* metaphor, drawing from Lakoff and Johnson's seminal (though debated) 1980 volume, *Metaphors We Live By*.

In Lakoff and Johnson's own words, the "*essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" (1980, 5, emphasis in original). In the more specific terminology of their conceptual metaphor theory, "kinds of things" are the domains noted by Steen, and "understanding and experiencing one . . . thing in terms of another" is mapping. Further, a *source* domain is the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions. A *target* domain is the one that we try to understand by applying elements of the source.

Consider *eating* as a source domain—a well of words that connect to or describe that concept; for example, *insatiable*, *thirst*, and *food*. Consider the concept of acquiring ideas—*curiosity*, *knowledge*, *thought*—as a target domain. When we map source onto target, we arrive at metaphor: *She had an insatiable curiosity. Her thirst for knowledge dried up when she stopped teaching. Her life offers food for thought.* Or, drawing from the source domain of *war*, we can map that source onto *workplace* (the academic library, for example) and end up here: *I usually do one-shot information literacy sessions. For students, libraries and professors are the first line of defense. You've got to pick your battles with faculty.*

One of the criticisms of conceptual metaphor theory⁸ is its propensity to rely on set mappings. For example, Vervaeke and Kennedy caution against implicit metaphor theory, where one metaphorical interpretation is generalized, trumping others. Therefore, with respect to the metaphor *argument is war* and such terms as "*attack and defend*" (1996, 282, emphasis in original), they note that over time these terms have evolved to develop abstract senses not necessarily connected to war and, therefore, "have senses that are independent from military discourse" (282).⁹

8. For a balanced discussion on the debate around Conceptual Metaphor Theory, see Raymond Gibbs' chapter, "Conceptual Metaphor in Thought and Social Action" (2014).

9. This is similar to a dead metaphor, which is an "expression that was originally metaphorical but no longer functions as a trope and is now understood literally, e. g., 'tail light,' 'foot of the mountain,' 'head of state.' . . . The common theory holds that the cause is repeated use over time." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics Online*, s.v. "dead metaphor." Accessed November 4, 2018, https://search-credoreference-com/content/entry/prpoetry/dead_metaphor/0

While some war metaphors seem irredeemable from such connections, this note of caution certainly bears consideration. In academic libraries, when we *defend our position* to faculty about database cancellations, or when students' frustration with warnings about plagiarism become a *mentality we have to combat*, we are not necessarily linking *defense* and *combat* to armed warfare. However, as we will see, these words may matter more than we are aware.

More recent considerations offer a broader lens through which to consider conceptual metaphor. Gibbs discusses a dynamical systems perspective, which “sees conceptual metaphor as an emergent phenomenon that arises from the interaction of numerous constraints operating at different time scales” (2011, 551). This perspective expands the possibilities of how conceptual metaphor works. To demonstrate, Gibbs provides these examples:

[the] understanding of a conventional metaphorical expression, like ‘I don’t see the point of this article,’ may not just arise from the simple activation of a primary metaphor, such as ‘Knowing is seeing,’ which has been stored within some conceptual network. Instead, people may spontaneously create a particular construal of this expression given the interaction of constraints from all of the previously mentioned, and other, levels, and what emerges from these interactions, in the very moment of speaking and understanding. Conceptual metaphors may, therefore, be ‘soft-assembled’ during thinking, speaking, and understanding, rather than ‘accessed’ or ‘retrieved’ from long-term memory. (552)

Cameron et al. echo Gibbs, noting that a “complexity/dynamic systems perspective . . . changes how we see metaphor: it is no longer a static, fixed mapping, but a temporary stability emerging from the activity of interconnecting systems of socially-situated language use and cognitive activity” (2009, 64).

Is it possible then, when Librarian A says to Librarian B, *Those first year classes are real mine fields*, that neither librarian is activating/accessing the primary metaphor *workplace is war zone*? Is it possible that there is “soft assemblage” afoot, leading to on-the-spot understanding of the metaphor? That such a metaphor makes sense simply from being “socially situated” and “cognitively activated” rather than from being fixed to the conceptual source of war? While these potential explanations may have merit, we see them as lacking in complexity when considering war-metaphor use. There are other factors to consider.

Economy and Metaphor

The principle of economy is mainly what drives linguistic change. That is, language strives to do more with less. Metaphor is no exception and, as such, becomes handy. It saves us from having to spell things out literally. Ortony refers to this in his “compactness thesis” of metaphor (1975, 47-48), which Maass, Suitner, and Arcuri summarize as “the capacity to communicate multiple characteristics in a single

expression that would otherwise require a long list of properties. For instance, the metaphor *shark* implies, in a single word, a whole chunk of features such as *aggressive, vicious, cruel, unscrupulous, merciless, and tenacious*" (Mass, Suitner, and Arcuri 2014, 158, emphasis in original).

If we consider compactness—or economy—in more extended metaphors, we can talk about a *long, rocky matrimonial road*, rather than describe in detail five marriages, four divorces, alimony and child support. Or—to return to the library war-language context—rather than send out information about a database trial to a large group of faculty members, inviting their comments and suggestions, we can *just scatter shot and see how many hits we get*.

Goodman insists that metaphor's inherent shorthand is imperative:

This incessant use of metaphor springs not merely from love of literary color but also from the urgent need of economy. If we could not readily transfer schemata¹⁰ to make new sortings and orderings, we should have to burden ourselves with unmanageably many different schemata, either by adoption of a vast vocabulary of terms or by prodigious elaboration of composite ones. (1976, 80)

However, metaphor's lingual efficiency is not always related to verbal economy or "compactness"—as is evident from our earlier example: *At some point we'll just have to pull the trigger*. Why not say: *At some point we'll just have to make a decision*? Since both statements have the same number of words, no verbal economy exits. Or does it? Is it possible that the metaphorical phrase engenders a more complex and powerful message than the literal one?

As long ago as the last century B.C., strong visual metaphors were thought to be particularly potent. In Cicero's opinion, "metaphors taken from the sense of seeing are much more striking, because they place in the eye of the imagination objects which otherwise it is impossible for us to see or comprehend" (1840, 260). More recently, Ortony asserts this notion in another of his metaphor theses, vividness. Metaphors, he says, are "particularly vivid because of their proximity to, and parasitic utilization of perceived experience; by circumventing discretization they enable the communication of ideas with a richness of detail much less likely to come about in the normal course of events" (1975, 50). The effect of this vivid imagery does not stop there; rather, it contributes to a metaphor's "strong emotive force. . . . Because of a metaphor's greater proximity to perceived experience and consequently its greater vividness, the emotive as well as the sensory and cognitive aspects are more available" (50).

10. "A *schema* is generally considered to be a representation in memory of a particular concept, category, or situation. Schemas contain general information about something that is typically true across situations" (Meier, Scholer and Fincher-Kiefer, 2014, 44).

What does *make a decision* look like? Does it evoke the image of a defined act? A clear result? Not compared to *pull the trigger*, which at some level creates a picture, perhaps even a movie, in our minds. Someone holds a gun. She aims. She engages her index finger and draws back the trigger. What happens? A bullet discharges with great speed and (perhaps we can hear it?) a loud bang. Whether or not we actually imagine all those details in the second it takes to say *pull the trigger*, this vivid metaphor establishes a connection between diachrony (the history of the expression) and synchrony (the here and now), hence creating a shortcut. A lengthy explanation is unnecessary, as long as those engaged in the verbal interaction share some of the contextual, diachronous elements. Further, when the trigger is pulled, there is no turning back from this firm and definitive action. Something changes at an exact moment in time. In comparison, *make a decision* is visually and temporally amorphous and, so, arguably less potent.

Returning to Ortony's vividness thesis—which asserts that emotions are more available when metaphors are vivid—we might also ask: What does *make a decision* feel like? In comparison, how does it feel to *pull the trigger*? In the context of metaphor's potential visual effects, consider a few more war-based metaphors harvested from the academic library milieu, preceded by parallel statements in non-figurative language:

- We received some severely critical remarks from the faculty in their review of the library.
- *We were torpedoed by faculty.*
- What were the consequences of the contentious presentation at our last library council meeting?
- *What was the fallout from the meeting?*
- No matter how many information literacy sessions students are required to attend, they still can't write a solid academic paper.
- *Put a gun to students' heads... they still can't write a paper.*

In every case, the metaphor paints a more vivid, concrete picture and therefore—we assert—has a more emotionally loaded message than the literal statement. The former does not simply *pack a bigger punch*. It paints a stark image of polarization, power struggle, and dominance (even annihilation) through violence. Four decades ago, the philosopher Ted Cohen made a point about choosing to use metaphor when literal language would do just as well. In this discussion about war metaphor, his point is uncomfortably ironic:

I think of this point as the *achievement of intimacy*. There is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another. Three aspects are involved: (1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer

expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community. All three are involved in any communication, but in ordinary literal discourse their involvement is so pervasive and routine that they go unremarked. *The use of metaphor throws them into relief, and there is a point in that.* (1978, 8, emphasis added)

Language is inherent to human condition. Even before using it to communicate, we use it to categorize objects in the world. We label these objects to reflect the world that surrounds us, and in which language is spoken, and then recreate the world through words. Further, because it reproduces reality, it is only normal for language to reflect its environment. This explains, in part, why people living near a seacoast will employ more maritime vocabulary and, it follows, more maritime metaphor. However, according to Steen and Gibbs, we don't need to have experienced something first hand to use and understand a related metaphor:

It is not necessary for every adult to have undergone the same set of cultural experiences motivating the bulk of conventional metaphors for these metaphors to be a significant part of people's personal conceptual and linguistic repertoires. Adults may have simply learned how to use words in a conventionally metaphorical fashion *on suitable occasions.* (1997, 4, emphasis added)

For example, even if we have spent our entire lives land-locked in Saskatchewan, we know the difference between a library administration that is shipshape and one that is a shipwreck. And if we know generally what an underwater self-propelled weapon is and does, we can make sense of: *We were torpedoed by faculty.* The question is: Why, in academic libraries, would we choose to use metaphors like the latter—metaphors grounded in the lingual domain of war and violence? For such language, when could there possibly be a “suitable occasion?”

Effects of Metaphor

As noted above, one of the war metaphors heard (and written) frequently in the academic library setting was *front line*—specifically, a version of: *Staff on the reference desk are working on the front line.* Though its application has expanded over time, *front line* is a term unquestionably rooted in warfare—both historically and contemporarily. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017)¹¹ cites its first usage in 1677 under this definition: “The foremost line or part of an armed force; the furthest position that an army has reached and where the enemy is or may be engaged.” But that's not what we mean about the reference desk, is it? And anyway, calling it the *front line* doesn't affect how we respond to people who come to the desk. Or does it? To shed some light on these questions, we turn to research in social psychology.

11. “front line, n. and adj.”. *OED Online*. December 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/414623?redirectedFrom=front+line>.

In a sequence of related experiments, Thibodeau and Boroditsky demonstrated that metaphors influence not only how we conceptualize situations, but they also affect our subsequent opinions and actions. The researchers presented participants with

a report about increasing crime rates in the [fictional] City of Addison and asked them to propose a solution. For half of the participants, crime was metaphorically described as a beast preying on Addison, and for the other half as a virus infecting Addison. The rest of the report contained crime statistics that were identical for the two metaphor conditions. The results revealed that metaphors systematically influenced how people proposed solving Addison's crime problem. When crime was framed metaphorically as a virus, participants proposed investigating the root causes and treating the problem by enacting social reform to inoculate the community, with emphasis on eradicating poverty and improving education. When crime was framed metaphorically as a beast, participants proposed catching and jailing criminals and enacting harsher enforcement laws. (2011, 2)

In this first experiment, the metaphoric frame and language of beast or virus was densely imbedded in the reports about Addison's crime rate. In a second experiment, only a single word differentiated the reports (i.e., crime is a *virus*, or crime is a *beast*, ravaging the city). However, the results were the same. Further experiments demonstrated that "when asked to seek out more information to inform their decisions, [participants] chose information that was likely to confirm and elaborate the bias suggested by the metaphor" (9). Additionally, when asked to "identify the most influential aspect of the crime report" (3), participants cited crime statistics, not metaphor. In other words, the strength of metaphor's influence was covert.

While this research deals with a broad societal issue rather than one specific to a library reference desk, its potential implications bear reflection. Do metaphors we choose to describe working at that desk affect how we conceptualize the experience and how we respond to it? Does *working on the front line* place us, metaphorically, in a position where those who move toward us are the enemy, from whom we must defend ourselves? Does it conjure, covertly, a sense of challenge, fear and antagonism, rather than one of welcome, enthusiasm, and a desire to offer assistance? Potentially, yes.

Maass, Suitner, and Arcuri investigated metaphor's effect on intergroup relations, and found that "metaphors may induce stronger stereotypical inferences than semantically similar trait descriptions" (2014, 164). In their study, participants read descriptions of a lawyer and a politician, where the description contained statements reflecting common stereotypes of these professions. However, the researchers

varied the last statement . . . using either a metaphor (lawyer: "his colleagues describe him as a *shark*"; politician: "his colleagues describe him as a *fox*") or an equivalent nonmetaphoric adjective (lawyer: "his colleagues describe him as *unscrupulous*"; politician: "his colleagues describe him as *shrewd*"). In the control condition, the final statement was

omitted. Participants then rated each of the two target persons on a number of scales, including scrupulousness (immoral, merciless, daring), and shrewdness (astute, cunning, sly). Unsurprisingly, the target persons were perceived more in line with the stereotype when the additional, stereotype-relevant information was provided. More important, . . . this effect was stronger when the information was *communicated through a metaphor compared with a semantically similar adjective*. (164, emphasis added)

In the context of intergroup relations, Maass, Suitner, and Arcuri note that “stereotypes act as rigid boundaries, within which the same characteristics are applied to all members of the group” (2014, 154). While their research investigated metaphoric adjectives, it is evident in the City of Addison study that this brand of stereotyping can arise from metaphors of different linguistic patterns, and can generate particular responses. Landau, Robinson, and Meier offer an explanation about how and why this occurs:

metaphor may also create *stability* in attitudes. That is because metaphor transfers not only bits of knowledge from a concrete concept to an abstract concept but also the sheer *self-evident nature* of one’s knowledge about the concrete concept. When people use that concrete knowledge as a framework for making sense of an abstract issue, they may be equally confident that their beliefs and attitudes toward that issue are correct. (2014, 282, emphasis in original)

Rigid boundaries. Confident in being correct. Highly resistant to change. We put a gun to a student’s head to get her to write a paper and—even under threat of assassination—she fails to do so. There may not be an overt adjective in the metaphor; however, our victim is a representative of a particular group that shares trait of student-hood. In what other rigid, ostensibly homogenous, stereotypical category does the metaphor place her?

Reflections and Remedies

Why do academic librarians use war metaphors? It is tempting to look for a categorical answer to this question when, in fact, the question is both too narrow and too wide. As noted earlier, war metaphor is ubiquitous. We find it within diverse professions and across society. Librarians are language users and, as such, are not impervious to societal influences. So, use of war metaphor has little to do with librarians; it has to do with the social institution of language itself. Library-specific lexicon aside, there is no reason why academic librarians might use language differently than others.

Similarly, recourse to metaphor in general is not the sole property of any specific profession or delineated group. We have seen that metaphors serve language users in many ways; for example, through their inherent economy (they say more with less), their vividness (they are richly and unusually visual), their potency (they can evoke

stronger effects than nonfigurative language), and their intimacy (they engender a connection between creator and recipient). That we use and will continue to use metaphor—this rich and efficient language tool—is certain. *How* we use it is more open to discussion.

As we have demonstrated, a metaphor can lead to effects of which we are not conscious; this includes stereotyping and stability in attitudes, as well as subsequent opinions and actions. The crucial question, then, lies not in why academic librarians use war metaphors, but rather to what extent their use affects, or might affect, interaction between themselves or with library users.

In fifteen years of gathering war metaphors in the academic library world, no one pointed out or questioned their use in the moment they arose. “No one” includes the librarian who gathered them. Does this constitute an avoidance of discomfort, or a wise decision on her part or that of her colleagues? Drawing attention to war metaphor as it arises might have merit in some instances. However, there are more timely and effective means to shift away from this inappropriate and potentially damaging discourse, and to move toward one that reflects nobler aspirations of academic librarianship. We suggest three of them.

1. Engage in Salience

Our choice of metaphor is never innocent. It puts a listener here, rather than there, mentally. From studies cited earlier, it is apparent that the consequence of doing so can be detrimental. When a pattern of metaphor use becomes ingrained in a workplace, it ceases to be noticed, which affects individuals and the organization as a whole. Changing this pattern is difficult, but imperative.

As Evered notes, “Organizations only really change when there are concomitant changes in the words, symbols and metaphors of an organization” (1983, 141). To change language, we must be aware of what is being said; to do that, we first must listen attentively. If applied consciously and intelligently, salience can be a tool for such attention. Salience can tune us in to discourse patterns, sensitizing us to our own use of war metaphor and that of others. In this context, “listening” is meant in the broadest terms; it encompasses not only what we hear, but also what we see. For example, a sign on the door of a university union office (War Room), or a gesture (hand shaped into a pointed gun), are metaphors of war. So are the hundreds of instances in the library literature where we read the phrase *front line*.¹²

12. In July 2019, in the database Library & Information Source, we conducted a search for *frontline** OR “*front line**” in all text fields. The period 01/01/1986 to 31/12/2000 yielded 172 results. The period 01/01/2001 to 31/12/2015 yielded 856. Beyond prolific use, these statistics demonstrate Amossy’s (1991, 9) metaphorical definition of lingual stereotype: “the ready-to-wear of the mind” (in the original: “le prêt-à-porter de l’esprit”). When a term like *front line* comes into vogue in libraries—as it clearly did since the turn of the century—we may assume that just as fashion trends can pull us, unthinking, toward clothing choices, so too can lingual ones sway our parlance.

2. *Engage in Reflective Practice*

Far from being a simple tool for communicating ideas or characterizing the “real” world, language is a form of action. We cannot separate what we say from what we do. Because language permeates practice in this way, engagement in reflective practice requires deep consideration of language use within and across practice situations.

Finlay’s summary of reflective practice points to the application of attention through self-awareness and critical evaluation, which are crucial to examining language issues. But where she refers to the individual, we suggest expanding that awareness and critique to include the broader culture in which we work. This is not to stand in judgment of one another, but to recognize how, collectively, we accept war metaphor use and perpetuate the implicit assumption that it is okay to do so, and surreptitiously promote a climate of antagonism. As Evered notes, changing this is not an individual endeavour:

The “organization” has no objective reality (in a positivistic sense), but rather *is created daily by the linguistic enactments of its members in the course of their everyday communications between each other*; that is, by the way in which its members talk, hold discourse, share meanings. The particular language of an organization has embedded within it a categorization and structuring of a world which externalizes itself by being used. The existence of a common language implies an intersubjectivity of the inherent world view. The sense of objectivity is, in truth, achieved by this linguistic intersubjectivity. (1983, 126-27, emphasis in original)

A great value in personal reflective practice is the light it shines on our heretofore inadvertent actions, and creates new insights about the consequences, whatever their stripe. A great value in shared reflective practice, we contend, is the opportunity to act as a light for each other, and for the collective. If we want “to gain new understandings and so improve” (Finlay, 1) the metaphorical language with which we communicate, can we find a way to support each other respectfully in the effort?

3. *Find Alternatives*

Metaphor is a figure of speech that can leave a troublesome wake. Landau, Robinson and Meier remind us how potent metaphor can be, and how important it is to attend carefully to its use:

exposure to metaphorically framed messages and embodied experiences can bias people’s attitudes toward abstract issues by leading them to base their attitudes on knowledge of familiar concrete concepts, without due consideration of the unique properties and features of the abstract issues. The practical implication is that interventions designed to reduce bias in attitudes should pay particular attention to the metaphors individuals and groups use to frame discourse as well as individuals’ physical ecology. (2014, 281-282)

So it is incumbent upon us to choose metaphors with care, anchoring them in conceptual domains that are, at the very least, nonviolent. Metaphors of war fail this

test. Rather than use them, we can customize our language with metaphors grounded in other, richer and more appropriate, domains. If we know something about the sea and sailing, we can replace *we were torpedoed by faculty*, or *faculty sure dropped a bomb in that report*, with *faculty sure made big waves*, or *faculty really took the wind out of our sails*. If we know something about gardening, instead of suggesting we can *scatter shot and see how many hits we get*, we can *scatter seeds and see how many take root*. Of course, there is also the option to use literal, rather than metaphorical, language. We can set aside the gun, with its quick-fire trigger, and simply *make a decision*.

Final Thoughts

Without metaphor, language would be bereft of much of its rich, provocative imagery and poetic resonance. But metaphor is not only a lingual enhancer; it is also a lingual imperative. As Ortony notes in his inexpressibility thesis, “there are cases in which it would seem that there is no possible way of literally saying what has to be said so that if it is to be said at all metaphor is essential as a vehicle for its expression” (49). While the academic library world rightly draws upon this figure of speech, its use of war metaphor does not fall into the essential-for-expression category. War metaphor is used by choice—one that has potentially unfavourable, if not damaging, consequences.

Can we constantly monitor our speech? Can we resist and relinquish all questionable language that arises in the professional culture in which we are immersed? The answer is no. But we *can* make an effort to be more vigilant and conscious, more thoughtful and judicious, about the words we utter. This paper is an attempt to encourage such efforts—particularly with respect to war metaphor. It is an invitation to develop within ourselves a unique consciousness which is aware of the violence that resides in speech.¹³ It is call for engagement in language that will engender and sustain positive relationships between those who work in academic libraries and those who use them.

This paper is also intended to stimulate further discussion and research. With respect to the latter, Landau, Robinson and Meier offer some helpful suggestions:

a useful tool for hypothesis generation is to observe the expression of metaphor in ordinary language, images, ceremonies, and other practices by which people construct and communicate systems of cultural meaning. Researchers can turn to penetrating analyses of ordinary conversation . . . , commercial messaging and visual media . . . , and gesture . . . , or they can just listen carefully the next time they or anyone else opens their

13. The use of ‘violence’ here is not hyperbolic. Among others, Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1990) demonstrated how language constitutes a form of violence on most, if not all, fronts: grammatically (the phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantical rules one needs to follow), socially (how one is perceived and categorized according to the way one speaks), and pragmatically (conversational and cultural rules).

mouth, to observe how individuals and groups use metaphors to communicate about *events, causation, emotion, social organization*, and many other abstract social concepts. (2014, 271, emphasis in original)

Expunging the academic library lexicon of war metaphor will take time, effort, and patience. It will require that we are attentive and resourceful. It will rely on our commitment to reflective practice, and on remembering that the latter of these two words is both a noun and a verb.

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