

**James Lawley and Penny Tompkins (2000) *Metaphors in mind: Transformations through symbolic modelling*
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Background

It seems odd to be reviewing in this journal a book about the practical use of metaphor that is six years old, already has one translation into another language (Italian) and summary papers in several languages. But conversations at a recent conference ('Researching and Applied Metaphors' – Leeds, UK) suggests that the work it describes is not well known to metaphor researchers.

Perhaps this reflects the gulf between the world of practitioner/trainers who rely on shared experiences and face-to-face contact vs. the academic world of journal articles and statistics. But it is a pity.

On the first page of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) they say: *'If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor'*. Lawley and Tompkins describe simple techniques that bring this metaphorical foundation to the surface as a vivid 'reality'. Their book is clearly written, well documented and very practical, including transcripts that bring the techniques to life. If I had a research student working on metaphor, experience of Lawley and Tompkins' work would be a key part of their basic training.

Before introducing the techniques, it might help to set the context. The approach described in the book begins in the 1980s with a New Zealander, David Grove, who had moved to the UK as a psychotherapist. He found himself working with clients who had suffered from traumatic events in their childhood – abuse, etc. Initially he adopted Ericksonian hypnotic strategies. But remembering terrifying events can re-traumatise the client, and a conventional therapist-client power relationship can resonate with the original abuser-abused power relationship. Grove therefore began working indirectly via metaphor-based imagery, and developed a radically client-centred approach. Clients explored their own metaphor-based internal world in their own way, with essentially content-free ('Clean language') prompts from the therapist.

Though a very creative therapist/trainer, Grove is not a documenter. However, in the early 1990s, James Lawley and Penny Tompkins had become interested in the NLP concept of 'modelling': identifying an outstanding practitioner, immersing yourself in their methods and ideas, and then clarifying and operationalising what they do, to generate a set of clear, effective and teachable procedures.

1 This is an early draft of a review that was subsequently published in 'Metaphor and Symbol', Volume 22, Issue 2, March 2007, pages 201-211

They came across Grove's work, were intrigued by it, and persuaded him to let them 'model' his approach. This was complete by the late 1990s, leading to training programmes, a website (www.cleanlanguage.co.uk), and, in 2000, their book.

To give a flavour of the approach, here are the opening exchanges from one of the transcripts in the book:

- Therapist: And what would you like to have happen?
- Client: I'd like to have more energy, because I feel tired.
- Therapist: And you'd 'like to have more energy because you feel tired'. And when you'd 'like to have more energy', that's 'more energy' like what?
- Client: It's like I'm behind a castle door.
- Therapist: And 'it's like you're behind a castle door'. And when 'behind a castle door', what kind of 'castle door' is that 'castle door'?
- Client: A huge castle door that's very thick, very old, with studs, very heavy.
- Therapist: And 'a huge castle door that's very thick, very old, with studs, very heavy'. And when 'a huge castle door is very thick, very old, with studs very heavy', is there anything else about that 'huge castle door'?
- Client: I can't open it and I get very very tired trying to open it.
- Therapist: And 'you can't open it and you get very very tired trying to open it'. And as 'you get very very tired trying to open it', what kind of 'very very tired trying' is that?
- Client: Like I'm struggling on my own and not getting anywhere. It takes a lot of energy. I feel like I'm banging my head on a wall.

In understanding what is going on here, it is useful to separate the two main elements: the unfolding 'metaphor landscape' and the 'clean language technique'.

'Metaphor landscapes'

'Metaphor landscape' is the term Lawley and Tompkins use for the developing image. As the transcript continues, we begin to hear of the granite castle wall that is impossible to get through, of a Roman centurion who appears at one point, of a pool of gold, and various other features, and in due course, after various 'magical' transformations, the client finds that she can open the door, and feels much better as a result.

Under the influence of the questioning, the client seems to be unpacking some sort of personal folk-tale. But it is not just a story, because it seems to be producing real changes, and a 'successful outcome' is often signalled by a very tangible sense of resolved tension and completion. Sometimes the client can 'explain' the change, but often may simply be aware that 'things seem better'. Sometimes an 'explanation' may become apparent over the next few days. It is as if the story-imagery is providing an accessible interface via which underlying neural processes can be rearranged in some way that is experienced as helpful.

The 'metaphor landscape' phenomenon is certainly not a new discovery, and probably has very ancient roots. Another common term has been 'waking dream' or 'rêve éveillé', coined by Robert Desoille in the 1930s, because the spontaneous transformations that occur seem similar to those in dreams. Indeed, Desoille's early work coincided with the emergence of the Surrealist movement in art, and while I'm not aware of any direct contact between him and the main surrealists, there were certainly commentators who were aware of the links.

There are useful histories of this phenomenon in Kretschmer (1951), Shorr (1983), and Sheikh (2002). Some of the recurring names include Freud (in his 1892 ‘concentration technique’ which he later abandoned), Jung, Caslant, Desoille, Happich, Leuner, Fretigny and Virel, Assagioli, Hammer, Singer, Shorr, Epstein (1981), and more recently Kopp (1995). There are also a number of modern French books that relate directly to the Desoille tradition (e.g. David Guerdon – 1993, 1998; Elisabeth Mercier – 2001; Georges Romey – 2001). But this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Most people who experience this phenomenon are struck by its power and vividness; Epstein (1981) even refers to it as a different ‘realm of existence’, and though one might challenge the metaphysics of this, it is a very apt descriptive metaphor. The phenomenon is easy to induce, seems to be almost universal (though see Thomas, 2001, for a discussion about people who say they have ‘no imagery’), and familiarity has often been regarded as beneficial. It is hardly surprisingly that it has been rediscovered repeatedly, though it has attracted remarkably little research for such an obviously salient phenomenon. This is partly for historical reasons: the bitter wrangles of the early introspectionists (Wundt vs Külpe), the behaviourist taboo on subjectivity, the analytic philosophers’ dislike of images being treated as ‘things’ ‘in’ the mind, and psycho-analytic orthodoxy, which preferred to work with speech, regarding imagery as merely a kind of interfering smoke-screen. But underlying all of these was perhaps a ‘modernist’ culture that was uncomfortable with this oddly ‘magical’ and emotively potent mental mode. Luckily the psychedelic, therapy-hungry, 1960s blew at least some of that away, though academic orthodoxy still seems rather uncomfortable about it - Thomas refers to a persisting academic ‘iconophobia’! One can only assume that working on an area that has a whiff of magic, mysticism, and folk tales is seen as an out-of-paradigm Career Limiting Move to many research psychologists!

‘Clean language’

While ‘metaphor landscapes’ are familiar, the notion of ‘Clean language’ is new. In itself, it is a very simple technique, at least for basic use. But its value is that it opens up a very different perspective on the metaphor landscape phenomenon.

Many earlier authors acknowledged the apparent autonomy of the ‘waking dream’/‘metaphor landscape’, and recognised the need for the client to explore their metaphor landscape in their own way. Nevertheless, they still felt obliged to intervene in various ways! Some set the initial metaphor (e.g. *‘Imagine you are in a meadow’*; *‘Imagine you are looking down on two armies’*; *‘Imagine your right hand talking to your left hand’*). Some prescribe various kinds of action as the ‘story’ unfolds (e.g. *‘See what happens if you climb the hill’*; *‘Somewhere you will find a message for you’*; *‘Try to talk to it’*). Some try to engineer transformations (e.g. *‘What if you could change the image so that it would be better for you, how would you change it?’*). Some offer interpretations to the client. Some form their own interpretations – possibly based on their prior theories about the nature of therapy – and then use these to direct the action. Some make assumptions about how the client is experiencing the landscape – e.g. assuming that they have a *visual* image.

‘Clean language’ questioning

‘Clean language’ maintains a question-and-answer relationship, but in such a way as to minimise directive interventions or assumptions. The client sets the initial agenda

and the client's own words create the initial trigger. No interpretations are offered at any stage.

The questions are simple fact-finders that direct attention, but do nothing else. There are thirty in all, but most of the work can be done using a small sub-set of very simple 'what, where, when' questions, such as:

- *and is there anything else about that ...?*,
- *and that ...is like what?*,
- *and where is ...?*,
- *and then what happens?*

where the '...' sections copy the client's exact words or non-verbal gestures.

As you can see from the 'castle door' example above, the questions are usually set in a 'full syntax' which has the format:

... and [*client's words/non-verbals*] ... and when/as [*client's words/non-verbals*] [*clean question*]

a structure derived from Grove's earlier hypnotic work, designed to direct attention, minimise cognitive load, and make it easier for the client to remain in the 'imagery-observing' state that the questions generate.

There are no assumptions about imagery being visual, auditory, etc. or about its content (other than that it has a location in space and time). All questions can be answered by direct 'inspection' of the image - there are no 'why' or 'how' or 'explain' questions that would require analysis, or pronouns or other forms of indirection whose comprehension would impose a cognitive load. There is no re-interpreting or rephrasing of the client's words.

Much of the therapeutic gain lies in the *spontaneous* changes that occur in the imagery. Metaphors that emerge from the on-going discussion are explored in increasingly focussed ways, until, at some unpredictable point, the imagery transforms. Subsequent questioning then consolidates this transformation. The process then recycles with another metaphor from the on-going flow of conversation, and so on.

Metaphor landscapes appear to have continuity over time. A client attending regular weekly sessions will have no trouble re-entering last week's landscape. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a client may 'inhabit' a rather small number of recurring (but evolving) landscapes throughout an extended period of therapy.

The process is robust, and at 'beginners level', provided that the 'therapist' and 'client' are comfortable with one another, and are prepared to 'play the game' and spend some time on it, basic exploratory work can often be done by writing the nine commonest questions on cards, and dealing them at random! There have even been attempts to produce a 'Liza'-type computer program to generate questions, though the parsing and input-output problems are still problematic. Of course, a skilled therapist can work very much more effectively, take less time, and handle much more substantive issues.

Further applications

The final chapter of the book lists some of the applications that Lawley, Tompkins and those they have trained have found for their technique, beyond psychotherapy, couple therapy, and closely related areas such as life coaching (where it has been used quite extensively).

It is an excellent aid to developing rapport and good listening and communication. Trainees interested in this aspect have included teachers, doctors, personnel managers, counsellors and others. It is also building up a track record as an interviewing tool – police have been taught it for interviewing vulnerable witnesses, it has been used in recruitment interviewing, it has been used to interview project managers to get a description of how they do their job. In education, it has been used to help individual children with learning blocks of various kinds, it has been used to help with anger management and classroom disruption, and it has been used to help children articulate their reactions to films, books, etc. and for those with learning or physical disabilities. There has been some work with psycho-somatic conditions and with physical activities such as sport. Caitlin Walker has developed corporate applications – e.g. a technique for helping a team to negotiate a shared metaphor. This has been used not only in team-building, but also in applications such as a software firm which required shared metaphorical descriptions of software systems at early design stages, so that a salesman could talk to a non-technical client about the product and the client's requirements. It has also been used by a pastor, within a religious context, to help people to examine 'spiritual' aspects of their lives.

OK, it's a useful technique, but what can it do for the researcher?

Lawley and Tompkins' book is mainly concerned with the practical uses of their technique, and I'm not aware of any academic research applications so far. But the area seems to offer a range of possibilities.

- *Its role as a demonstration.* Clean language work can give the researcher a vivid sense of the underlying nature and dynamic of metaphoric processes. The experience of helping someone to solve a problem entirely at the metaphorical level, so that the helper has no idea what the actual problem or solution are, though the problem-owner is wholly satisfied by the result, is a deeply provocative experience to one brought up in a 'rational' culture. I have found it a good way to demonstrate the power of these apparently bizarre processes to students.
- *Its ability to reveal underlying metaphoric structure.* Many attempts to identify the metaphors underlying a particular culture, discipline, tradition, profession, etc., by extracting metaphors from interviews, publications, etc. have fallen foul of the sorts of criticisms raised by Schmitt (2005). Clean language work suggests that such metaphors are usually only the (relatively uninteresting) tips of much more complex and far-reaching 'landscapes'. You wouldn't try to understand a house merely by examining the key-hole on its front-door. Clean language seems to offer a way of opening the door and looking inside – though the complexities of what you find may well create their own methodological problems.
- *Do metaphor landscapes constitute higher level structures from which conceptual metaphors take their meaning?* Just as metaphorical linguistic expressions tend to cluster within particular conceptual metaphors, so, perhaps, conceptual metaphors themselves are merely parts of much larger 'landscapes'.
- *Can they tell us something about the perceptual construction of 'reality'?* Metaphor landscapes can seem very 'real' – not in a hallucinatory sense (there is never any confusion with physical reality) but in the quality of the image, and in its apparent autonomy – the client can be just as surprised by what 'appears' as the therapist. Thomas (1999, 2006) has argued that imagery is a result of 'active perception' in a way not dissimilar to the way our interaction with the physical world creates our

perception of it. If so, the apparent ‘realism’ of a metaphor landscape may be, at least partly, generated by the interactive ‘clean questioning’. Yet Thomas (2001) also suggests that images are the result of a rather variable process of construction that uses whatever is available. He even quotes a rather bizarre report that during the era of monochrome TV, people tended to report monochrome dreams, but when colour TV appeared, they reported coloured dreams! Even if we take this report with scepticism, it does suggest that the apparent ‘realism’ of the metaphor landscape may not be as robust as it seems.

- *There seems to be a relation between the factors that shape art forms and the inherent dynamics of the metaphor landscape.* A clean language session tends to have the structure of a ‘folk-tale’. It is shaped by the way the inherent tensions of the developing metaphor landscape are explored, heightened, and resolved. This is often much closer to the ‘shapes’ of poetry or music than to the usual rational structure of a problem-solving process, in which an issue is uncovered and clarified, analysed, and a solution is agreed on.
- *Metaphor landscapes seem to have something to do with human ‘spirituality’.* An anecdote: some years ago, after I had demonstrated metaphor landscape work to a group of students, I was approached by a small delegation very concerned that I was ‘raising spirits’, and clearly didn’t realise what I was doing. While I didn’t accept that explanation (which seemed to be rooted in their Christian beliefs), the fact that it was offered was most interesting. This is a recurring theme in the history of ‘metaphor landscapes’. Caslant, who first introduced the phenomenon to Desoille in the early 1900s, had been trying to find a method of studying clairvoyance and paranormal abilities. Happich had been trying to adapt eastern meditation techniques to create a form of Christian meditation, and only switched to using it therapeutically when he failed to arouse any ecclesiastical interest. Assagioli’s Psycho-synthesis (which was very influential in introducing European work on imagery to the USA in the 1950s and ‘60s) was deeply influenced by his Italian catholic roots. Epstein linked his work to his Jewish religious/mystical framework. The solving of a personal problem via series of apparently ‘magical’ imagery transformations that are largely outside one’s conscious control is a strange, and even disturbing, phenomenon. At very least one can see that it readily invites descriptive metaphors of a ‘mystical’ kind.

Metaphor landscapes and their transformations are powerful, curious and fascinating phenomena. They seem to lie close to the roots of a number of major areas of human experience.

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