

New Models and Metaphors for Communication

Sergej van Middendorp, 17 September, 2017

As a scholar and practitioner I wonder how we can create wholeness in an increasingly complex world. In search for answers, I focus on the systems that we make and use to work together to generate health, wealth, and peace. A key lever in the development of such systems are the metaphors that we use to generate them. In this rubric, I discuss a writing from the archives of Barnett Pearce's work from the perspective of metaphor theory and research. The archive is at Fitchburg State University's digital library and can be accessed here:

<http://digitalarchives.fitchburgstate.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15892coll12>

I found the manuscript "[New Models and Metaphors for Communication](#)" (Pearce, W. B., n.d.) in the archives when I searched for "metaphors".

In this article, which seems a manuscript for a chapter or a journal, Barnett reflects on the shift from the 'old' to the 'new' paradigm of communication. He uses three metaphors, that of an earthquake, that of serpentine motion, and that of games to provide a frame for navigating this 'new' paradigm. He then introduces the concept of social construction through five characteristics and several implications for practice. All the while, Barnett gently introduces concepts from CMM.

I discuss a few things that struck me in the manuscript in the context of generating systems through metaphor.

When he talks about metaphor, Barnett refers to the work of Mark Johnson. Since the creation of this manuscript, Johnson and his colleagues (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; Johnson 2007; Johnson, 2014) have developed the theory of embodied realism, which, rooted in second generation cognitive science, provides support for many of social constructionism's assumptions. Mark Johnson's recent work, *Morality for Humans* (2014), for example is a great companion to Pearce and Littlejohn's *Moral Conflict* (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Another metaphor theory came to mind when I read the following passage, about someone who has 'made' the paradigm shift: "Well, I knew this all along and the things I used to say were simply prefigurations of my new insights" (p.8). Schön, in his displacement of concepts describes the shift he experienced when he learned that polishing is scratching (Schön, 1963/2011). In learning that a polished surface becomes smoother to the touch and eye by applying minuscule scratches to that surface, Schön's understanding of polishing changed. And, because of the complex interactions between the concepts of scratching and polishing that make that understanding happen, his conception of scratching also changed. However, after the new understanding has settled into his everyday understanding, the reflexive relationship between the two concepts disappears. "Of course polishing is scratching, I always knew that!"

It seems that the direction of understanding (a need to better understand polishing in the example above) entails that we 'lose' the means (scratching) by which we came to the new knowing. There seems to be a relationship with what Barnett says further on in the manuscript (p. 21), when his students tell him that because they are 'native' to the 'new' paradigm, they can easier talk about it than their teacher, who still carries the tools that he needed to shift himself from the 'old' to the 'new'.

Earlier in the manuscript, Barnett introduces contextual and implicative forces (p. 20) He describes these forces in ways that are analogous to conceptual and generative metaphor theory. Most conceptual metaphors are non-consciously used in conversation. While Most generative metaphors are deliberately and consciously used to co-create new 'realities'. In earlier work (Van Middendorp, 2014), I tried to intertwine this analogy with CMM theory by saying we could think about a generative metaphor force field and about a conceptual metaphor force field. In the generative metaphor force field, we choose metaphors that help us provide coherence to a complex of practical and implicative logical forces, and in the conceptual metaphor force field we can surface those non-conscious metaphors to consciousness which provide coherence to contextual and prefigurative forces that are 'in our way' when we try to generate the 'new'.

I hope these ideas may be helpful with what Barnett intends when he says that: "more than sentences describing truths, we need good judgment

about how to act in uncertain, unfinished situations in which our actions will shape what happens." (p. 22).

I recommend the manuscript as a gentle introduction into the philosophy 'behind' CMM and as an introduction to social constructionism and related CMM heuristics.

And as an invitation to more conversation about this article, I have the following questions:

Is anyone here familiar with this manuscript?

Do you know if and where these thoughts have been published?

How have you used Barnett's writings on metaphor?

What else did Barnett write about metaphor?

Where else does Barnett build bridges between social construction and cognitive science?

Please follow up with these questions by contacting me at sergej.van.middendortp@milesahead.eu

References

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