METAPHOR AND SYMBOL, *22*(2), 201–211
Copyright © 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Metaphors in Mind: Transformation Through Symbolic Modelling. James Lawley and Penny Tompkins, London: Developing Company Press, 2000, 336 pages, 0953875105, $29.95.

Reviewed by John N.T. Martin
Department of Systems
Open University, UK

BACKGROUND

It seems odd to be reviewing in this journal an excellent book about the practical use of metaphor that is 6 years old, already has a couple of translations (Italian and French), and has summary papers in several other languages. But conversations at a recent conference suggested that the work it describes is not yet well known to metaphor researchers.

Perhaps this reflects the gulf between the practitioner/trainer world of shared experiences and face-to-face contact versus the academic world of journal articles and statistics. But if I had a research student working on metaphor, experience of Lawley and Tompkins's work would be a key part of the basic training because of its striking capacity to bring our internal metaphorical worlds to life.

The first page of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) says: *"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."* James Lawley and Penny 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. Their Web site (http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk) includes a substantial collection of articles (mainly by them, but also by others, e.g., several important articles by Philip Harland), some of which describe developments since their book was published.

Before introducing the techniques, it might help to set the context. The approach described in the book and on the Web site begins in the 1980s with a New Zealander, David Grove, who had moved to the USA as a psychotherapist. He found himself working with clients who had suffered from traumatic events in their childhoods–abuse, for instance. Initially, he adopted Ericksonian hypnotic strategies. However, he became concerned that recovering memories of traumatic events might re-traumatise a client, and a conventional practitioner–client power relationship might take on echoes of the original abuser–abused power relationship. Grove therefore began working indirectly via metaphor-based imagery, and developed a radically client-centered approach. Clients explored their own meta-

phor-based internal world in their own way, facilitated by essentially content-free ("clean language") prompts. This enabled clients to experience internal changes that allowed them to move on in their lives. The practitioner facilitated the process and could easily observe the external signs of change, but could often only guess at its internal content.

Although a very creative practitioner and trainer, Grove is not a documenter. However, in the early 1990s, James Lawley and Penny Tompkins had become interested in the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) concept of "modelling": that is, identifying outstanding practitioners, 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.

They were intrigued by Grove's work, and persuaded him to let them "model" his approach. This was complete by the late 1990s, leading to training programs, their Web site, and, in 2000, their book. They call their version of Grove's approach "symbolic modelling."

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

> **Facilitator:** And what would you like to have happen?
>
> **Client:** I'd like to have more energy, because I feel tired.
>
> **Facilitator:** … 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.
>
> **Facilitator:** … 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.
>
> **Facilitator:** … 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.
>
> **Facilitator:** … 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.

At first glance, this dialogue may seem a little strange, but in a "live" therapeutic setting, the client experiences it as very supportive of their own internal symbolic world without being directive. In non-therapeutic settings, a more "everyday" language format is usually adopted. The aim of the process is to help the

client to “self-model” — i.e. to explore some of their own internal experiences by externalising them as an accessible narrative.

“Symbolic modelling” has two main elements: the client’s unfolding “metaphor landscape” and the facilitator’s “clean language technique.”

“METAPHOR LANDSCAPE”

“Metaphor landscape” is the term Lawley and Tompkins use for the client’s scenario or story that emerges as the dialogue proceeds. Although this may often be visual imagery, any mix of sense modalities (sound, feeling, taste, smell, touch, etc.) can occur—for example, for some people it might be completely non-visual, perhaps auditory or kinesthetic. “Imagery” is being used here as a generic term for all modes of internal representation.

As the “castle door” transcript continues beyond the excerpt you have just read, we hear of a granite castle wall that is impossible to get through, of a Roman centurion, of a pool of gold, and various other features, and in due course, after various apparently “magical” transformations, the client finds that she can open the door, and feels much better as a result. This sense of immediate gain is often sustained in the longer term, although it may take some further work to consolidate it.

Under the influence of the nondirective questioning, the client seems to be unpacking some sort of personal folk-image or folk-story. But unlike a normal folk-tale, the unpacking process seems to produce real changes. A “successful outcome” is often signaled to the facilitator aesthetically, by a very obvious sense of resolved tension and completion in much the same way that you know that a poem or piece of music is finished. Sometimes the client can “explain” the change. Sometimes an “explanation” may become apparent over the next few days. Often the client may simply be aware that “things seem better.” It is as if the “story” provides an interface to underlying neural processes so that they are helped to rearrange themselves in ways that are 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 evéillé,” coined by Robert Desoille in the 1930s, because the imagery and 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 although I am not aware of any direct contact between him and the main surrealists, there were certainly commentators who were aware of the parallels.

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 (1993), Hammer, Singer, Shorr, Epstein (1981), and more recently Kopp (1995). There are also a number of

modern books in French that relate directly to the Desoille tradition (e.g., Guerdon, 1993, 1998; Mercier, 2001; Romey, 2001). Gendlin (1978) developed an approach to essentially the same phenomenon based mainly on kinesthetic imagery. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Many people who experience this phenomenon are struck by its power and vividness. My first contact with this approach was when researching material for my UK Open University teaching, and some of my students have reported being moved to tears just by reading session transcripts. Epstein (1981) refers to it as a different "realm of existence," and while one might question his metaphysics, it is a very apt descriptive metaphor. The phenomenon is normally easy to induce and seems to be almost universal, although see Thomas (2001) for an interesting discussion about people who say they have "no imagery," and Richardson (1994) for a more systematic account of individual differences in imagery. A comfortable familiarity with the phenomenon has often been regarded as beneficial.

It is therefore hardly surprising that it has been rediscovered repeatedly, although it seems to have attracted surprisingly little serious research for such an obviously significant phenomenon. This is partly for historical reasons, such as the bitter and unproductive wrangles of the early introspectionists (Wundt vs. Külpe), the subsequent behaviourist taboo on subjectivity, the analytic philosophers' dislike of images being treated as "things in the mind," and psychoanalytic orthodoxy, which preferred to work with speech, regarding imagery as merely a kind of interfering smokescreen. But underlying all of these is perhaps a "modernist" culture that is uncomfortable with this oddly "magical" and emotively potent mental mode. Luckily, the psychedelic, therapy-hungry 1960s blew at least some of this away, although academic orthodoxy still seems strangely 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 psychological researchers!

"CLEAN LANGUAGE"

Although "metaphor landscape" describes an established phenomenon, the "clean language" technique is new. In itself, it is a very simple approach, at least for basic use. But its value is that it opens up a very different perspective on the metaphor landscape phenomenon.

Many of the authors listed earlier have acknowledged the apparent autonomy of the "waking dream," and the value to clients of exploring their own inner worlds in their own way. Nevertheless, they have still felt obliged to make interventions! 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).

In contrast, although "clean language" maintains a question-and-answer relationship, it does so in such a way as to minimize 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 framed around the client's own words (e.g., see the italicized phrases in the "castle door" extract presented earlier). They direct attention, but try to avoid adding any further content.

Grove developed 30 questions in all, but most of the work can be done using a small subset of very simple "what, where, when" questions, such as:

Is there anything else about that …?

That … is like what?

Where is …?

Then what happens?

The client's exact words or nonverbal gestures should be inserted at the ellipses.

In a therapeutic context (as in the "castle door" example), 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*]

This structure is derived from Grove's earlier hypnotic work, and is designed to direct attention, minimize cognitive load, and make it easier for the client to remain in the inner-directed state that the questions generate. Outside the therapeutic context, a more "everyday" syntax tends to be used.

The questions make no assumptions about imagery being visual, auditory, and so forth, or about its content (other than that it will make sense to ask questions about location and time). All questions can be answered by direct "observation" of what is being experienced. There are no "why" or "how" or "explain" questions

that would require analysis or supposition. There are no pronouns or other forms of indirect referencing whose interpretation might impose a cognitive load. The client's words and gestures are not re-interpreted or rephrased, sometimes even to the extent of retaining the client's "I," "you," and so on. The facilitator's tone of voice and manner aim to be unobtrusive and neutral—quiet, unhurried, matter-of-fact, and often with only minimal eye contact.

Much of the therapeutic gain is assumed to lie in the spontaneous transformations that occur, which presumably represent some kind of underlying neural reorganization. So metaphors are explored in increasingly provocative ways, until, at some unpredictable point, the imagery transforms. Subsequent questioning then consolidates this transformation. The process then recycles with another metaphor from the ongoing flow of conversation, and so on.

Metaphor landscapes appear to have continuity over time, at least in the therapeutic context. A client attending a regular weekly session will often return to landscapes from previous weeks. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clients may often "inhabit" a rather small number of recurring (but evolving) landscapes throughout an extended period of therapy.

The process is robust:

- Clean language dialogue seems to work well over the telephone—a small telephone training group has been established, and some practitioners have worked quite extensively with clients over the phone.
- At "beginners level," provided that "facilitator" and "client" are comfortable with one another and are motivated 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. This can be a useful workshop "hands-on" experiential activity, particularly if preceded by a short demonstration.
- Another "random" approach that has been tried is an adaptation of the well known "Eliza" computer program converted to generate "clean language" questions (see http://www.cleanlanguagecoach.co.uk).
- Some of my Open University students claim to have had useful "beginners" sessions where facilitator and client communicate using MSN Messenger.

Of course, a skilled practitioner judging timing and choice of questions carefully, can work very much more effectively than a beginner, take less time, and facilitate the resolution of much more intransigent issues. So for serious use, as distinct from beginners' demonstrations, it is well worth getting practical training rather than trying to work "from the book." Like chess, learning the basic rules of the game is easy enough, but skilled deployment in challenging settings is another matter.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The final chapter of the book lists some of the applications that Lawley, Tompkins, and their trainees had found for their technique by 2000, beyond its initial use in psychotherapy, couple therapy, and closely related areas such as life coaching (where it has been used quite extensively). Supplementary uses have continued to emerge in the years since the book was published.

I am not aware of any formal evaluations of these supplementary uses of clean language, although the need for them is growing as more practitioners become involved in competitive tenders, especially for projects in public bodies. There would, of course, be considerable methodological difficulties because clean language is merely one tool among many in such a project, so its effects would be hard to isolate.

A common claim in these supplementary applications is the value of "clean language" as an aid to developing rapport, good listening, and good communication. Trainees who have made use of this aspect have included teachers, doctors, personnel managers, counselors, leadership trainers, and others. "Clean language" is 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 jobs. In education, it has been used to help individual children with learning blocks of various kinds, to help with anger management and classroom disruption, to help children articulate their reactions to films, books, and so on, and to help those with learning or physical disabilities. There has been some work with psycho-somatic conditions and with physical activities such as sport. There have also been corporate applications (e.g., Caitlin Walker has developed 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 that required shared metaphorical descriptions of complex software systems at early design stages, so that a nontechnical salesman and a nontechnical client could discuss the product and the client's requirements. Other uses include a pastor helping people to examine the "spiritual" aspects of their lives, and even a nice example of its use by a well-known chef (see http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/MikeDuckett-Sweetshop.html).

RESEARCH APPLICATIONS

Although there have been some academic research applications since the book was published, the use of symbolic modeling and clean language as research tools is still largely untapped, and the metaphor landscape phenomenon remains a potentially important research topic in its own right.

SYMBOLIC MODELING AND CLEAN LANGUAGE AS RESEARCH TOOLS

- *As a demonstration.* Symbolic modeling can give the researcher a vivid sense of the powerful, but often bizarre, underlying nature and dynamic of metaphoric processes. As I said earlier, if I had a research student working on metaphor, it would be a key part of basic research training.
- *As a way of helping researchers become aware of their own underlying metaphors.* Because metaphoric assumptions exert their influence largely out of awareness, the researcher bias they introduce can be insidious. A technique such as symbolic modeling can allow researchers to actively investigate their own thoughts, discover their own preferences, and manage their biases in a more conscious way.
- *As an interviewing tool that enables interviewees to give their own views without being unwittingly led by the researcher.* Lawley has conducted many interviews in organizations. Clean language can be used in an apparently conversational manner in this context, although the result is not a normal conversation or interview. Lawley recalls one manager saying after such an interview: *"I don't know what was going on, but you sure got me to think deeply about what I do."*
- *In questionnaire design.* Lawley and Tompkins have acted as consultants in the development of the Yale Learning and Development Inventory sent out to large numbers of American school children. They worked with the questionnaire designers to help reformulate its questions in a "cleaner" way.
- *As a way of discovering the metaphors people use to make sense of their experience.* There have been many attempts to identify the metaphors underlying a particular culture, discipline, tradition, profession, and so on, usually by extracting metaphors from interviews, publications, and so on. These have often fallen foul of the sorts of criticisms raised by Schmitt (2005). Symbolic modeling suggests that such "public" metaphors may well be only the (relatively uninteresting) tips of much more complex and far-reaching "metaphor-scapes." You would not try to understand a house merely by examining its front door. Clean language offers a way of opening the door and looking inside.
- *As a way of enabling discussion between very disparate, potentially conflicting groups.* The Dutch action researcher, Stefan Ouboter, has used symbolic modeling to interview diverse groups of stakeholders such as environmentalists, academics, local government officials and planners, and the general public. Ouboter used symbolic modeling to help the very different groups of participants identify their own metaphors for the current situation and how they would like it to be, and then used those metaphors as a means of sharing views between the different groups.

- *In the understanding of foreign languages.* A current applied issue in metaphor research is to find ways to help students who are learning a foreign language to grasp its underlying metaphoric frameworks. Marion Rinvolucri and Judy Baker have been using clean language in teaching English as a second language.

"METAPHOR LANDSCAPE" AS A RESEARCH TOPIC IN ITS OWN RIGHT

For instance:

- *Do metaphor landscapes constitute higher level structures from which conceptual metaphors take their meaning?* Just as families of metaphorical linguistic expressions seem to be generated by particular conceptual metaphors, so, perhaps, families of conceptual metaphors may themselves be parts of much larger "metaphor-scapes."
- *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 as the facilitator by what "appears." Thomas (1999, 2006) has argued that imagery is a result of "active perception" in a way not dissimilar to our "active perception" of the physical world. If so, the apparent "realism" of a metaphor landscape may be, at least partly, generated by the interactivity involved in dialogue about it. Yet Thomas (2001) also suggests that images are the result of a construction process 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 color TV appeared, they reported colored dreams! The apparent "realism" of the metaphor landscape may not be as "solid" as it seems.
- *Is there 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 aesthetic 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 "shaping" found in poetry or music than to the usual rational structure of a problem-solving process, in which an issue is uncovered and clarified, analyzed, and a solution is agreed on.
- *Is there a relation between metaphor landscapes and human "spirituality"?* Some years ago, after I had demonstrated metaphor landscape work to a group of mature students, I was approached by a small delegation very concerned that I was "raising spirits," and didn't realize what I was doing. While

I did not accept that explanation (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 1960s) was deeply influenced by his Italian Catholic roots. Epstein linked his work to his Jewish religious/mystical framework. It is not difficult to see how the strange and rather "magical" world of the metaphor landscape might invite descriptive metaphors of a "mystical" kind.

Metaphor landscapes and their spontaneous transformations are powerful, curious, and fascinating phenomena. They seem to lie close to the roots of a number of major areas of human experience. The Grove/Lawley/Tompkins approach, as described in Lawley and Tompkins (2000) and in their Web site and training programs, seems to offer a useful way to explore them.

REFERENCES

Assagioli, R. (1993). *Psychosynthesis: The definitive guide to the principles and techniques of Psychosynthesis*: London: Thorsons, HarperCollins. (Original work published 1965)

Epstein, G. (1981). *Waking dream therapy: Dream process as imagination*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Gendlin, E. (1978). *Focusing*. Everest House.

Guerdon, D. (1993). Le Rêve éveillé: Initiation pratique. Oniros. ISBN 2-909318-01X. See *http://www.oniros.fr/RE.html*

Kopp, R. R. (1995). *Metaphor therapy: Using client-generated metaphors in psychotherapy.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Kretschmer (1951). Die meditativen Verfahren in der Psychotherapie. *Zeitschrift fur Psychotherapie und Medizinische Psychologie*, *1*(3).

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mercier, E. (2001). Le Rêve-éveillé-dirigé revisité: Une thérapie de l'imaginaction. Paris: L'Harmattan. ISBN 2-7475-0762-9. See also: *http://www.oniros.fr/RE.html*

Richardson, A. (1994). *Individual differences in imaging: Their measurement, origins, and consequences*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.

Romey, G. (2001). *Le Rêve Éveillé Libre: Une nouvelle voie thérapeutique.* Albin Michel.

Schmitt, R. (2005). Systematic metaphor analysis as a method of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, *10*(2), 358–394. See: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR10-2/schmitt.pdf

Shorr, J. E. (1983). *Psychotherapy through imagery.* New York: Thieme-Stratton Inc. See Chapter 11 in particular, but also *passim*.

Sheikh, A. A. (2002).*Handbook of therapeutic imagery techniques.* New York: Baywood Publishing Co. Ltd. See Chapter 11: "The Oneirotherapies."

Thomas, J. T. (1999). Are theories of imagery theories of imagination? An active perception approach to conscious mental content. *Cognitive Science*, *23*, 207–245. See also: http://www.members.leeds.ac.uk/n.j.thomas70

Thomas, N. J. (2001). *Are there people who do not experience imagery? (And why does it matter?)* See: http://www.members.leeds.ac.uk/n.j.thomas70

Thomas, N. J. (2003–ongoing). *New support for the perceptual activity theory of mental imagery: An ongoing bibliographic essay.* See: http://www.members.leeds.ac.uk/n.j.thomas70

Vanson, S. (2006). *Identity and transformational change*. See: http://www.theperformancesolution.com/index.php