

6. INTERPRETING METAPHOR (2/25)

We will cover two main topics today, the use of tropes in rhetoric and persuasion, and how we go about deciphering tropes.

Last time we mostly looked at tropes as ways to understand something, but also used for persuasion. Especially noticeable concerning historical metaphors. Analogies like Munich or Korea were used not just to understand the Vietnam War but to sway others, get them on board.

Rhetoric and influence.

Tropes are such a staple of oratory and persuasion, the association is so strong, one of reasons why tropes are associated with deception, with describing things as what they are not.

But there is nothing inherently wrong with persuading through tropes. Just like language in general, they can lie or tell truth.

In many cultures persuasion often a matter of finding just the right trope.

At one regional political meeting among the Kuna, with about three hundred delegates, speakers used all sorts of tropes from nature, daily life, and Kuna mythology. I recorded the following:

-Men appointed to a special commission to deal with a problem complained they were denied the resources needed to carry out the job: compared to a man sent by his wife to work in the forest without the proper refreshing drink.

-A chief trying to explain that a certain situation had both good and bad features: compared to drinking cane beer at puberty ceremonies, which established by God and basically a good thing, but which brings lots of trouble.

-A speaker criticizing Kuna representatives on a national assembly compared them to the ungrateful wayward sons of a hero named Piler.

-Encouraging people to expel peasants who had invaded Indian lands: compared to a snakebite, occurs at one spot on body but then spreads throughout.

-In criticizing outside mining interests, pointed out that the earth was the body of the Great Mother, mining was like incest or rape.

-In warning against educated men, alluded to chant by famous chief in which had said that such men would bring a devil into the meeting house---depends on equation between non-Indians and evil spirits. Going to the city routinely referred to as traveling to the stronghold of the evil spirits.

-To justify cooperating with outsiders on a project, mentioned great hero who briefly married the daughters of evil spirits to learn their secrets.

-Any sort of struggle or effort or confrontation inevitably compared to their great rebellion against the government of 1925.

Such rhetoric of course plays crucial role in many struggles in rallying people. One of Churchill's greatest contributions to survival of Britain during World War II was rhetoric he used to encourage fortitude and resistance.

Kuna had their own dark years during 1910s and 1920s, in which missionaries tried to suppress their religion, and then national government tried to dominate them and to eradicate native culture.

Chiefs sing to their followers several nights a week. Chief sings for hour or so, semi-intelligible to listeners, and then sub-chief interprets speaking, explains histories or metaphors, draws out lesson and relevance for today.

-Would sing about great hero Tat Ibe, who expelled the demons and pacified the world, would say must fight like him. Or must emulate another hero, Twiren, who taught wimpy ancestors to stand up to blood-sucking enemies, defeated them in great battle.

Also sing elaborate metaphorical tableaux. Set pieces. One of things most remembered for today. Compare police to sharks, invading turtle-fishermen to diving cormorants. Story of brother-in-law who marries into family but turns out to be a cannibal monster: criticizes young men who favored change as well as outsiders.

One chief famous for singing: "Foot-tip clothes; I am your father. The outsider says he will make himself my father"---was an attack on Catholic missionaries, who wore long robes down to their toe-tips, and who insisted on being called Father.

Most famously, the greatest leader of time, named Cimral Colman, sang long series of verses representing the dangers facing Kuna and their inexorable advance. (See hand-out.)

According to the Kuna themselves, these metaphors helped galvanize opinion and prepare people for the great rebellion

We now turn to our second question. Less concerned with how *they* (whoever *they* are) use tropes than how *we* try to figure them out.

Reading and deciphering tropes.

We have seen that many of the ways people use metaphors are remarkably similar all over world. Kuna choose certain wood for curing figure because it is extremely hard. On other side of world, islander chooses another wood for his yam house because it is extremely hard.

The structure and the thought processes are remarkably similar, but the content can be quite variable.

Many interpreters of symbols, e.g. Freudians and Jungians, look for universal symbols. But anthropologists want to see what symbols mean locally first, in a particular culture or event or place, only later look for universals.

Most things used for tropes have multiple attributes. Even if we assume that people will notice many of the same ones, it cannot be established ahead of time which ones they will foreground in a metaphor. Same animal or thing can be interpreted in great variety of ways.

e.g. **Bees.**

In our culture, mostly very positive metaphors: sweetness of honey; industriousness.

Woman who center of attention, Queen bee.

Might call lazy person a drone. Metaphors of stinging, aggression, though for those often switch to hornets or wasps.

Anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon, who studied famous Venezuelan group, the Yanomami. They called him "Bee" because his name sounded like word for bee in their language. Was negative metaphor, suggesting he was persistent, buzzing, irritating, like bees swarming around something.

Native North Americans saw honey bees as sign of advancing frontier, arrival of whites, because honey bees came from Europe, arrived a few years before settlers. Metonym and metaphor at same time.

In one African culture, men who get together to drink beer from pot compared to bees around flower.

In the blues, very sexual: man's stinger; honey as female sexuality or genitals; buzzing around, like bees around flower.

e.g. **Wild pigs.**

Richard the III, King of England, had boar as emblem: tough animal, fought hard, formidable foe. Had hardened skin at shoulders, which spears bounced off, called a shield.

New Guinea society, men say they are like wild pigs, but opposite meaning. When wild pigs encounter people, crash off through brush to get away, describes how this people feel when encroached on by colonialism.

Kuna interpretation of two different kinds of pigs in dream symbolism already mentioned.

e.g. Trees whose fruit attracts animals.

Mentioned society in Africa where in magic metaphor of fruiting tree helps bring child out of mother.

In head-hunting society of New Guinea, fruit equals a human head, tree the victim's body, and a parrot or squirrel the headhunting man.

Kuna compare two kinds of tree to two kinds of chief: one with soft fruit that all animals can eat is like generous, good leader; one with hard shell that only big animals can crack is like chief who show favoritism. In another context, animal who come to tree compared to enemy who is drawn into ambush.

So, the big question, is: how do we decide which attributes and which meanings are the salient ones in any particular case?

Sometimes *they* will explain, or some clue will indicate. 'It means this, stupid.' Kuna chief I worked with could explain most of metaphors he used. But sometimes not: at end of four-day ritual, they kill a rooster with a bow and arrow. When I asked why, they said it had always been done that way, no other explanation.

Part of answer is to pay attention to what they know about the world, what they see in it. What goes on with pigs or fruiting trees? e.g. Kuna, hunters often set up a stand near fruiting trees, shoot animals that come.

Turns out that indigenous peoples often have very detailed knowledge of natural world: thousands of species of plants, all the habits of the animals. May not be scientific in sense of setting up experiments or testing hypotheses, but yes, scientific in sense of very careful observation of natural world.

One of my favorite examples: Eskimo (properly called Inuit) notice that huge polar bears can move across thin ice by lying out flat. (Can see in zoos how flexible polar bears are.) The Inuit sometimes move across micro-thin ice in same way.

Paying attention and respecting local knowledge can make huge difference.

Scandinavian explorers of the Arctic and Antarctic patterned their clothes on Inuit---very important that clothes can vent heat as well as retain it. Scandinavians mastered dog-sledding. Already very good on skis. Thus very successful. Amundsen in race with Scott got to South Pole first.

British were too arrogant to pay attention to what the natives did or learn their skills.

Scott tried ponies and motor vehicles, really inappropriate in polar regions, useless, never mastered dogs or skis. Ended up with men hauling sledges. Lost race, and whole team died on way back from Pole.

Similarly, in 19th century in Arctic, Franklin expedition, famous disaster, ended up all dead, some cannibalism, while nearby Inuit doing fine.

So one answer, for us as well as Arctic explorers, is to pay close attention. I got a Kuna metaphor that described birds called *giblu*, said to fly around sky in formation fighting invisible battles with spirits. In September of that year I saw them, were migratory hawks, red-tailed hawks and others, same as in U.S. Hawks and buzzards migrating through area circle around in huge vortices in sky, like bird tornado, turns out they are circling on thermals to get altitude before peel off and move on. Explains metaphor.

Problem for us is that we are too detached from natural world. Even simple farmyard metaphors may get past us because of ignorance. David Sapir has wonderful discussion of why dirty old men are compared to goats.

Same with allusions to classics and Bible. In past people had read Bible, often knew intimately. One could make metaphor simply by mentioning a character in Old or New Testament, or even by citing a verse.

Still, this is only part of answer, because goats and flowers and hawks and figures in the Bible have many attributes. How do we know which are relevant in particular case?

Must remember that every trope has two parts, the two things that linked together. We get at meanings by comparing the two parts, deciding what features they share. Often have to look at context of metaphor---what have been talking about, where you are, etc.--in order to decide which of shared features are relevant right now.

e.g. Bears. many attributes. depending on context and who or what compared to, salient feature could be love of blueberries, skill as fishermen, interest in garbage or in grubs in rotten logs, hibernation, etc. etc. But if talk about Russian bear, standard political metaphor, then comparison of two parts suggests shared attributes. [In class, these are indicated by two large overlapping circles, with shared attributes written in the intersection of the two circles.]

In this metaphor probably have in mind: bears' danger, temper, ferocity, formidable as enemy or adversary, reclusive, burly, hairy, lives in cold climate, may be emerging from isolation. The trope comments on Russians and Soviet government.

Has been suggested by theorists that metaphor actually consists of two linked synecdoches. Each side is concrete thing (bear/Russian) and classes of things of which it is an example (burliness, isolation), thus a synecdoche. One doesn't have to accept this idea, but underlines fact that we are comparing two things, looking for the attributes they share, as they are seen within a particular context.

Famous example of decoding. Men of a tribe in central Brazil, the Bororo, say "We are red macaws." (Macaws are a kind of parrot.) recorded by a 19th century explorer, this statement was used by Lucien Levy-Bruhl, a theorist who wrote about "primitive mentality" as a prime example proving that "primitive" tribal peoples were either too stupid or too controlled by group thinking to see that they really weren't parrots. Levy-Bruhl had lots of other examples supposedly showing that primitive man couldn't draw boundaries between himself and other things.

More recently, anthropologist named Christopher Crocker worked with the Bororo, wanted to solve famous mystery. Turns out it is crucial that only men say they are like macaws: it is about being a Bororo *man*. To decode, he had to learn all about macaws, and about men. (In Sapir & Crocker 1977, in supplementary readings.)

Macaws are associated with spirit world for several reasons: places where they are caught, mostly by robbing nests, is a lair of spirits. Dead souls pass through transformations, one as macaw. And men wearing macaw feathers are possessed by spirits in ritual. But macaws are also kept on little perches by house doors, fed banana by women, periodically plucked of feathers.

Men see selves as spiritual, women as material; men are the ones who manage ritual. In this way they see selves as superior to women. But men when marry move into wife's house, are never more than provisional member of household. Spend most of day with other men, go home briefly to be fed by wife.

So men are like macaws in that associated with spirit world, but also dependent on women, who keep them as kind of pet, feed them as do the parrots. Instead of a mindless claim showing primitive mentality, it is really a very subtle statement about the paradoxes of gender roles in Bororo society.