

On-Demand Lecture Series on Figurative Language and Political Discourse

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Abstract

This series of On-Demand lectures focuses on the use of figurative language in political discourse and provides illustrative examples from the United States, Iran, and Eastern Europe.

The first lecture begins with a discussion of the “referential theory of meaning,” which distinguishes between literal and figurative utterances. The theory argues that figures of speech are mere adornments that only “dress up” language and do not contribute to the cognitive dimension of meaning. Increasingly, however, scholars in the social sciences are paying attention to the rhetorical dimension of meaning and epistemological positions that construe knowing as “active meaning.” These new approaches focus on the grammatical, rhetorical, and narrative structures that create value, bestow meaning, and “constitute” the objects that emerge in an analysis of social activity.

In this lecture an effort is made to distinguish between explicit figures of speech and the metaphors of everyday life that are analyzed by Lakoff and Johnson in their book, **Metaphors We Live By**. Two of these metaphors, “argument is war” and “time is money,” are discussed in detail, along with the conclusion of the authors that such metaphors both “highlight” and “hide” aspects of a term; for example, “time is not really money—you can not get your time back.”

In the next lecture is an extended analysis of the “axis of evil,” a reference that President Bush made to North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and “their terrorist allies” in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002. The origin of this figure of speech, which is a metonym, is described and its referential function is analyzed in detail. The argument is made that figures of speech like the “axis of evil” are “creative metaphors,” that is, they are an attempt to construct a new understanding of the world.

The remainder of this lecture describes the results of interviews conducted with the “oppositional elite” in Iran after the “axis of evil” speech. The results of the interviews suggest that this metaphor was seen in Iran as a “stab in the back” that strengthened the hardliners and undermined the position of the moderate more democratic forces in Iran. Thus, the phrase had an impact that was opposite from what was intended, because the cultural context of the metaphor was not taken into account.

The third lecture in this series begins with a brief review of the first lecture on with an emphasis on the role of figurative language in suggesting new and more challenging equivalences. The lecture also refers to Derrida's analysis which argues that inherent in figures of speech are philosophical commitments and theories of value that do their "partisan work" under the guise of "neutrality." After comparing and contrasting metonymy, where an attribute or feature is used to name or designate something else, with metaphor, where an equivalence between two terms taken from different domains is suggested, two uses of metaphor are described. Metaphor can be used rhetorically to convince, but it can also be used to produce new knowledge or a novel understanding.

The remainder of this lecture is an extended example of the "seasons" metaphor that is often used to describe political developments in Eastern Europe. This analysis is based on a paper that was prepared for delivery by Professor Victor M. Sergeev at the International Studies Convention in March 2005. Sergeev argues that "seasons" metaphors, such as the "thaw" have been used since the 1950's to explain political developments, such as the "Prague spring" in 1967-68. The meaning of these metaphors can be described by "decomposing" the semantic elements and comparing the different domains, e.g., the weather and the political situation.

In the case of Eastern Europe and Russia the thaw is not the "spring," because a layer of snow still covers the ground. When spring finally comes, it liberates the natural forces of growth and produces food that makes human survival possible. Sergeev asks us to make note of the hidden meaning that is embedded here: Spring comes not because of human will but rather because the appropriate time of year has arrived. Hence, the metaphor contains the hidden assumption of the "inability of people to govern political processes." In addition, there is an "exciting" aspect to this metaphor. When the snow melts in Eastern Europe all of the "garbage" comes to the surface and has to be removed. On the political front this suggests that criminal forces (the "garbage") have to be removed after the political spring.

The analysis of "seasons" metaphors also reveals a view of political life that differs from the "structural" thinking of people in the United States and Western Europe, where change is seen as the result of the concrete actions of persons—actors who have a direct impact on a chain of events. In Eastern Europe, Russia, Iran, and Maoist China, on the other hand, a "holistic" view dominates. Change is seen as a result a continuous process without any intermediate steps. The main controllable variable in holistic thinking is the intensity of the process. Actors can do little more than to intensify or inhibit the process, much as they might water a plant or provide it with more sunlight. This analysis suggests that cognitive structures affect our view of the world, such cognitive structures are cultural in nature, and lying behind these structures are hidden views of reality that need to be taken into account in political analysis.