Figures of Speech: Metaphors in the Mobile Phone Literature

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Abstract

Scant attention has been paid to the use of figures of speech in describing mobile telephony and how it is used. While there are isolated cases, as yet there is no study of metaphor use across a larger corpus of mobile phone research. This paper addresses this gap by developing a preliminary survey, or mapping, of the use of metaphors and other discursive figures and tropes in the available literature on mobile phones. It does this by using metaphors in internet literature as a springboard for analysis, as a comparable communications medium. Both for their general role as communications technologies, and their specific historicized position as ‘new media’, and with their capacities increasingly overlapping, mobile phones and the internet form a useful counterpoint. The paper summarises the key findings from earlier work mapping and critiquing the use of metaphor in the critical and popular writing on the internet. It then compares and contrasts these internet-based metaphors against those in the mobile literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the perils and the promise of metaphor use in writing on communications technologies.

Keywords

metaphor, mobile media, mobile phone, internet

Introduction

Scant attention has been paid to the use of figures of speech in describing mobile telephony and how it is used. There are isolated cases, such as one study, for instance, which notes the use of visual metaphors in advertising campaigns and mobile phone content “in order to represent the experience derived from their consumption” (Aguado & Martinez, 2008, p. 7). As yet, there is no study of metaphor use across a larger corpus of mobile phone research. This paper addresses this gap by developing a preliminary survey, or mapping, of the use of
metaphors and other discursive figures and tropes in the available literature on mobile phones. It does this by using metaphors in internet literature as a springboard for analysis, as a comparable communications medium. Both for their general role as communications technologies, and their specific historicized position as ‘new media’, and with their capacities increasingly overlapping, mobile phones and the internet form a useful counterpoint. The paper summarises the key findings from earlier work mapping and critiquing the use of metaphor in the critical and popular writing on the internet. It then compares and contrasts these internet-based metaphors against those in the mobile literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the perils and the promise of metaphor use in writing on communications technologies.

In the analysis of the mobile literature to follow in the second half of this paper, metaphor use is examined across two different forms of literature: the advertising and related trade press, and academic studies of mobile phone use. Clearly, there are key differences in the way in which metaphors are likely to be employed in advertising trade press accounts of mobile media versus metaphor use in the academic literature. Indeed, and as I will argue in this paper, the former is characterised by an attempt to grasp the potential, especially the full commercial possibilities, of the medium, while the latter employs metaphors as a way of making critical sense of the various techno-social and cultural complexities attending mobile use. Examining both data sources is value in order to grasp the full implications of mobile phone use (both as a tool of commerce and as an information and communication technology) and how metaphors shape our understanding of this usage. I begin, however, by revisiting earlier work on the use of metaphor in the critical and popular writing on the internet.

**Metaphor in the internet literature**

Metaphors proliferate in the literature on the Internet from the 1980s and 1990s. Considerable critical attention has been given over to identifying the most prevalent of these metaphors and detailing the difficulties and shortcomings associated with their use (Adams, 1997; Graham, 1998; Wilken, 2007). However, much less critical attention has been paid to examining the same concerns in the available literature on mobile phone use.

Metaphor is traditionally understood as a linguistic structure that implies similarities between two ostensibly dissimilar things. The “essence of metaphor”, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, p.5) explain, “is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” – one of which is familiar, the other usually less so. For writers and readers, the
The power of metaphor rests in the fact that the familiarity of the ‘known’ domain can offer initial guidance to investigate and to plumb the ‘unknown’ domain.

The ability of metaphor to illuminate the seemingly ‘unknown’ explains the appeal of – and appeal to – metaphor in internet scholarship. It is the reason metaphors have been central to early imaginings of cyberspace (such as Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, which draws heavily on architectural metaphors in its representation of the ‘space’ of cyberspace), especially the many anecdotal accounts of cyberspace which ‘resemble the old ‘travelers’ tales’, accounts of adventurous trips from the civilized world to newly discovered, exotic realms” (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p.170). Metaphor proliferates in these accounts (Milne, 2000), a way of familiarising the ‘unknown’ via comparison with the ‘known’. The relative unfamiliarity of cyberspace and computer-mediated communication is made comprehensible via comparison with more familiar notions and experiences, such as surfing, navigation, exploration, frontiering, settlement, transportation, highways, sites, the desk, office and home, and architecture and urban planning. Obviously, this list is by no means exhaustive; and, a comprehensive inventory and detailed discussion of all metaphors employed to make sense of cyberspace is beyond the scope of this paper (see Adams, 1997). For purposes of the present discussion, it is simply worth being aware of three dominant types, which I have categorised as follows: navigation and transportation metaphors, pioneering metaphors, and architectural metaphors. Each has proven popular in terms of use, yet each has also proven contentious. These metaphors often hold considerable initial appeal. This appeal tends to mask, at least for a time, fuller recognition of the inherent shortcomings and difficulties associated with these metaphors.

It is often forgotten that the prefix ‘cyber’ is derived from the Greek root *kybernan*, which means “to steer or guide” (Tofts & McKeich, 1998, p.19; Buick & Jevtic, 1995, p.3). In the literature on cyberspace, the most literal use of this root meaning is in the metaphor of navigation, where, “this nautical figure is [considered] appropriate for a world imagined as a bit-stream of information flows” (Tofts & McKeich, 1998, p.19). The way that we ‘navigate’ these flows – the multiple pathways and hyperlinks of the internet – and the reported addictive nature of this activity, often pursued as an end in itself, has also invited comparisons with ‘surfing’ – a metaphor which is said to be “suggestive of [the Internet’s] dynamism and hedonism” (Tofts, 1999, p.23).

As for transportation metaphors, one of the more influential has been the description, from the early 1990s, of the internet as an “information superhighway”. Generally attributed to then US-vice president Al Gore, the information superhighway metaphor reached its peak in 1996,
declining ever since (Blavin & Cohen, 2002, p.271). Recourse to transportation metaphors is not surprising in this context given that communication and transportation are inextricably linked (Carey, 1989).1

What troubles some commentators about this metaphor is that it strongly describes the Internet in regulatory terms. For instance, it has been noted that, “if the internet is a highway, then government can regulate it for the safety of those who pass on it”, in much the same way as conventional highways are “subject to state and (indirect) federal regulation” (Blavin & Cohen, 2002, pp. 269-270). For those attempting to make sense of the social spaces of the Internet, this metaphor is of limited appeal. It “connotes a transfer of information”, not social interaction and habitation (2002), and it privileges one aspect of the medium and not the many possible uses and users of this medium (Jones, 2001, p.54).

Pioneering and settlement metaphors and narratives proliferate in those texts that conceive of cyberspace not so much as pure information space but as a rich social space. Indicative of such texts is Howard Rheingold’s Virtual Community. Originally released in North America with the subtitle, “Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier” (but altered in subsequent editions to, “Finding connection in a computerized world”), Rheingold’s text has been a key vehicle in the early promulgation of the community metaphor (which is a subset of the pioneer metaphor). The frontier as the promise of community is also evident in John Seabrook’s book Deeper:

The landscape of the Net was not the great wide-open landscape of buffalo herds and antelope, although I had imagined it was in the first year of my travels. The frontier was more communal now. The frontier lay inside the group (Seabrook, 1997, p. 131).

For writer Douglas Rushkoff, on the other hand, the metaphor’s metaphysical possibilities are of greatest appeal. Rushkoff conceives of cyberspace as “the next dimensional home for consciousness”, a “timeless dimension”, a “boundless territory” known as “Cyberia” (1994, p.16). All three examples support Gregory Ulmer’s (1994, pp.26-31) suggestion that the frontier metaphor has dominated understandings of digital media.

1 Indeed, Georges Van Den Abbeele notes that the word metaphor itself is rooted in the Greek word for transfer or travel (cited in Wolff, 1993, p. 237, note 17).

2 It is also worth noting in this context that even the concept of broadcast media has loose connections with pioneer and settlement metaphors. As Gumpert and Drucker (1996, p. 31) point out, “the concept of ‘broadcasting’ can be traced back to somewhere between 1760 and 1770, and it originally was an agricultural term used to describe the spreading or sowing of seeds”.

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The basic difficulty with the pioneering metaphor, and the tropes of ‘homesteading’ and ‘frontier’, is twofold. On the one hand, it is argued that both feed a nostalgic, pastoralist myth of community (Bell, 2001, p.98; Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 187). On the other hand, it is argued they perpetuate Western colonialist narratives, particularly of possession, oppression and dispossession, as well as the imposition of private property conceptions upon cyberspace (Sardar, 1996; Hunter, 2003; Rennie & Young, 2004; Olson, 2005). As one source puts it, “spatial metaphors become not merely useful tools for making the revolutionary changes of the information age less strange and unsettling, but a ready mechanism through which to manage and regulate the alien phenomenon” (Gumpert & Drucker, 1996, p. 32).

The third, and most prolific, metaphor type in writing on the internet is architectural. Architectural metaphors have proven immensely popular in computer interface design (most notably, Microsoft Windows and its associated ‘desktop’ iconography), and, in the design of the graphical user interfaces of many virtual communities – where users inhabit ‘rooms’ or frequent various ‘agora’, ‘cafés’, ‘bars’, and other social spaces – the use of architectural and urban planning metaphors has been widely documented (Mitchell, 2000). These metaphors, too, have attracted criticism. In interface design, architectural metaphors have been labelled non-intuitive, restrictive and conservative (Johnson, 1997, p. 61). Their usage in computer-mediated communications research more generally is also resisted on the basis that it promotes exclusion and forecloses alternative ways of conceiving of the social space of computer-mediated communications.

In their now classic book, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3) argue that “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” and that, in fact, “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is thoroughly metaphorical”. In this sense, metaphor is inescapable, all pervasive, and the study of it important if we are to grasp fully the way we experience and make sense of the world – especially that which we take to be ‘new’, novel, or which evades apprehension (the seemingly ‘unknown’). In the case of writing on the internet, critically examining metaphor use has proven instructive for revealing how this particular technological form has been understood (both in terms of its promise and its potential perils), particularly as a ‘spatial’ realm, and including the possible regulatory implications these metaphorical selections might carry. In the same way, an examination of metaphor use in the available literature on mobile media is likely to prove instructive for grasping how these media (especially mobile phones) are presently understood. It is also likely to prove productive for grasping how debate concerning present and future uses (and possible regulation of these uses) of mobile media are framed and shaped by particular metaphor selections.
In this way, it is valuable to ask: if metaphor is fundamental to conceptualise and understand the internet and its use, how does it function in understanding and analysis of mobile phones? Given the continuities between the two fields – in the sense that both are important contemporary information and communication technologies that increasingly provide access to the same data services (hence the description of the mobile phone as the ‘internet in your pocket’), and they also often share the literature generated by many of the same researchers and analysts who migrate over time from the internet to this new form of communication – it is worth asking whether there are similar metaphors at work in the writing on mobile phones.

**From internet to mobiles**

In examining the literature on mobile phone use, there are clear consistencies evident in the way that metaphors have been employed in earlier writing on the internet and in more recent writing on mobile phones. Navigation, transportation and pioneering metaphors are all identifiable in the mobile phone literature. Architectural metaphors, on the other hand, are all but absent in writing on mobile telephony.

Perhaps the clearest of these parallels can be found in the ‘primary source’ material of trade press literature on mobile advertising (by which I mean, advertising placed on mobile handsets or targeted at mobile phone users). The strong emphasis on the untapped potential of mobile devices as an advertising medium in the popular press and advertising trade press is significant insofar as it echoes some of the more popular accounts of the internet (‘cyberspace’) during the late-1980s to mid-1990s, and, as I have discussed above, the heavy reliance in these accounts on frontier, pioneer, discovery, and settlement metaphors and narratives (Adams, 1997). These same tropes are also in evidence in the rhetoric around mobile media advertising, where, for example, one encounters trade press talk of “vast opportunities”, “limitless potential”, and the need for “cultivating” consumers (Telephia, 2007).

But there are two key differences between the way in which the potential of the internet has been written about in the past, and the way in which the potential of mobile media is now being written about, and as discussed here. The first key difference is that the “cyberlibertarian” view of internet users (and designers) as “pioneers” crossing “frontiers” (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, pp. 17-22; Hunter, 2003) is not reflected in most literature on mobile media, especially that which is concerned with its marketing potential. In mobile advertising literature, mobile media are viewed specifically for their commercial potential,
with the mobile advertiser cast as the pioneer, and with mobile media viewed collectively as a frontier, a marketer’s golden land of opportunity (Wilken & Sinclair, 2008). This difference is to be expected given the concerns of the advertising trade press, as opposed to, say, the cultural and sociological analyses of mobile media use (Goggin, 2006; Ling, 2004, 2008).

The second key difference between the use of the pioneer metaphor in writing on the internet and writing on mobile advertising is that the latter is characterised by themes of hope tempered by caution, a dominant double-narrative in industry reportage on mobile advertising. This trope can be usefully explained via reference to an earlier, well-known narrative of discovery: Camoen’s *The Lusiads*. Written in 1572 in Homeric epic fashion, Camoen’s poem is a fantastical interpretation of the Portuguese voyages of discovery of the Far East Spice Islands by Vasco de Gama during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Confronted by adversity at every turn, and several treacherous attempts to halt his endeavours, de Gama proceeds cautiously, all the while entreating his crew to never lose sight of “the land of wealth abounding” which lies before them (Camoens, 1952, p. 161). In other words, *The Lusiads* is a tale of hopeful discovery tempered by caution. Mobile phone literature is similarly characterised so. For mobile phones, gone is the out-and-out optimism – indeed, the boosterism – that characterised much of the early literature on, say, the internet. In its place is a much more cautious narrative, albeit one which nevertheless entreats mobile marketers to never lose sight of “the land of wealth abounding” that many see as promised by mobile media. For instance, as has been noted elsewhere, “advertising agencies, the companies they represent, and the mobile operators, are all extremely sensitive about alienating consumers by inundating them with unwanted advertising appeals” (Wilken & Sinclair, 2008, ¶ 5). The peril for mobile advertisers in particular is that “any commercial message, particularly an unsolicited one”, has the potential “to be deemed intrusive, met with suspicion and, quite possibly, ignored” (Deign, 2006, p. 34). What is evident in this particular form of mobile media literature (the advertising trade press), then, is an extended pioneering metaphor, but with subtle yet significant variation: the addition of a distinctly cautionary tone.

Moving away from trade press accounts of the commercial potential and turning to academic analyses of mobile phone use, we can see further clear attempts to draw parallels in metaphor use between internet and mobile phone scholarship. Understandably, these parallels are particularly marked in the scholarly literature on the mobile internet. But such direct transferences are not necessarily successful. For example, one study investigates consumer experiences in accessing the internet via mobile handsets (Isomursu, et al., 2007). As part of this study, the authors quizzed users on the applicability (or otherwise) of internet metaphors for capturing their experiences of interfacing with the mobile internet. Findings revealed the
limited applicability of internet metaphors. As the authors note, the transfer of metaphors from the “fixed internet” to the “mobile internet” “creates false expectations towards the mobile internet and poor understanding of its possibilities and constraints” (p. 260). If these metaphors are to have ongoing currency, they argue, significant amendments are required.

In writing up their findings, the authors explore a number of metaphors for the mobile internet that incorporate these figurative adjustments. Navigational metaphors, and more specifically nautical metaphors (or what Isomursu, et al., 2007, refer to as the idea of the “internet as ocean”), are refined to distinguish between “scuba diving” (the immersive experience associated with internet searching) and “snorkelling” (the surface skimming they claim is more closely associated with mobile where the “user’s attention often is divided or can be interrupted at any moment” (p. 262)). As for the highway metaphor, the authors argue that a distinction should be made between the internet as a “branching road” and the mobile internet as a “straight road” “with specific destinations in mind” (p. 263). Finally, in terms of settlement metaphors, the authors argue the internet as a social space akin to a campfire – a comparison first made by Rheingold – a useful metaphor for capturing the social dimensions of mobile use in the Web 2.0 era (p. 263). Drawing on the work of Thornburg (2001), the authors expand this metaphor to distinguish three separate internal components: campfire (where people gather), watering hole (where people share information), and cave (where people can isolate themselves) (p. 264).

Notwithstanding the relative productiveness or otherwise of these particular metaphors, in both of the above cases – writing on mobile advertising, and the study of mobile internet user experience – there are clear continuities with the metaphors employed in writing on the internet, but also subtle differentiations for a new context.

**Metaphors to capture techno-social complexity**

Beyond the above examples, the presence of metaphors is decidedly more fugitive in the available literature on mobile phones than is the case in writing on the internet. There are a number of possible explanations for this, but here I would like to address one key reason, which has to do with the history of the telephone. Despite its rocky early reception, and the long and halting path it had to take to achieve widespread social acceptance (Fischer, 1992), the telephone has now become, “literally, a fixture of everyday life” for millions worldwide (Katz & Aakhus, 2002, p. 1). The widespread acceptance of and familiarity with the telephone – despite the novelties associated with its more recent transportability – suggests that metaphor is not so crucial in understanding mobile phones as a technological artefact.
As the telephone is to some extent a ‘known’, there is seemingly less need to explain the ‘unknown’ via reference to a metaphorical figure of speech as was required with the advent of the internet (‘cyberspace’). Indeed, being on the phone, by the phone, hanging on the line, and so on, are all common figures of speech.

Those additional metaphors that are discernible in the mobile literature, and that don’t rehearse or rework those used to describe and understand the internet, tend to be employed less for explaining the medium itself and more for making sense of the socio-cultural and socio-technical complexities associated with this medium’s use. This is the context in which critics have employed the biological metaphor of an ecosystem as a way of making sense of the manifold industry-related conflicts affecting mobile marketing (Wilken & Sinclair, 2008). Recourse to the dramaturgical metaphor of the theatre stage – famously first developed by Erving Goffman – can be understood in similar terms: as an attempt to make sense of the many nuances and ambiguities attending mobile users’ negotiations of public-private tensions (see Cumiskey, 2005; Fortunati, 2005a; Julsrud, 2005).

However, I would like to concentrate on at least two further examples of metaphor use that have been employed as a way of shedding light on the socio-cultural and socio-technical complexities of mobile use. The first of these is the metaphor of domestication, first employed in studies of home technology consumption and then extended to mobile phone use. The second of these is magical and mythological metaphors, particularly Arnold’s (2003) reference to the two faced Roman deity Janus to explain the many contradictions associated with mobile phones.

Roger Silverstone and Leslie Haddon developed the domestication approach originally as a way of making sense of the “intimate relations” that characterise the “production and consumption of a new media and information technology” within the domestic home (1996, p. 54). As they conceive of it, domestication involves a double process. On the one hand, new technologies (such as computers, DVD players, and mobile phones) are considered exciting but also potentially threatening and in need of being brought “under control by and on behalf of domestic users” (p. 60). On the other hand, as soon as they are “domesticated”, through ownership and appropriation into the culture, and through flows and routines of family, household and everyday life, these technologies are “cultivated”. That is to say, as they become familiar, or as they are placed alongside or replace existing technologies, the uses of these technologies change and are redefined (pp. 60 & 68). Silverstone and Haddon summarise this as a process that involves a “taming of the wild and a cultivation of the tame” (p. 60). While originally used in British studies of more-or-less fixed ICTs in the home, the...
concept of domestication has subsequently been applied to studies of mobile phones (Hjorth, 2007; Haddon, 2003; Morley, 2003). For example, David Morley (2003) extends the domestication model by drawing out the contradictory dynamic or tension between processes of technological domestication that occur within the family home, and other practices of everyday life by which mobile phone use “dislocates” (in the sense of a relocation rather than a supplanting of) domesticity.

The domestication model (or metaphor) can be read as a further example of the translation of pioneering or settlement metaphors from internet to mobile scholarship – especially given the explicit use of such language by Silverstone and Haddon. In this context, again, amendments have been necessary in order for this translation to work. Yet, Morley’s extension of the domestication metaphor to the study of mobile phones is perhaps more significant when read as an attempt to account for the complexities and contradictions by which mobile use continues to be implicated with and bound to more established sites of technology consumption, like the domestic home. Possible limitations to this metaphor might include a restricted scope due to its domestic setting, and a lack of serious consideration of the gendered implications associated with the metaphor.

**Magic and mythology**

Magic has formed a further key trope in writing on mobiles (Isomursu, et al. 2007, p. 265) as a way of making sense of the numerous complexities of mobile phone use. For instance, Katz and Aakhus (2002, p. 11) develop the concept of *Apparatgeist*, a portmanteau term which bridges the machinic with the cognitive and the spiritual, as a way of explaining the metaphysical qualities associated with mobile use. In later work, Katz (2006) deploys magic as an overarching metaphor for understanding mobiles because “magic is one of the salient characteristics of the technology as it is first experienced by many people” (p. 6). He also uses it as a way of drawing attention to the ‘too often overlooked spiritual, psychic and religious uses of the mobile phone” (p. 7).

Like magic, classical mythology is a key source of metaphors in the mobile literature. One of the more productive examples is Mike Arnold’s (2003) use of the Janus faced metaphor to explain the phenomenology of mobile phones. As Arnold explains, “Janus is a Roman deity cursed and blessed with two faces, and cursed and blessed with no option other than to look in different directions at once” (p. 233). Applied to our experience of mobile phones, the Janus metaphor is valuable in placing paradox at the centre of our understanding of this particular technology: “The mobile phone is facing each and every way, it is always and at once
pointing in different directions” (p. 234). Arnold then puts this metaphor to work in a careful explication of the seemingly endless structural ambiguities attending mobiles and their uses – the way they facilitate independence as well as co-dependence; lead to a greater sense of vulnerability while also providing reassurance; facilitate social proximity at the same as allowing greater geographical distance; blur the public and the private; make us both increasingly busy and also available, important and not so important; and so on. The Janus-face breaks from the existing suite of internet-based metaphors and is an isolated instance of a metaphor developed independently of the internet in order to make sense of mobile phones.

Arnold’s use of the Janus metaphor shares certain similarities with Castells’ deployment of the network metaphor in his work on globalisation. Anne Wallemacq argues that Castells’ application of the network metaphor is often “more incantative than analytical”, providing the means by which to “express some properties sometimes contradictory (despatialization and respatialization), or puzzling (the end of the notion of contiguity)” (Wallemacq, 1998, p. 607). In this way, Wallemacq suggests, the network metaphor “should not be seen as a descriptive concept”, but rather as “a kind of ‘totem’ – a method of thinking, a paradigmatical figure” (p. 608). The same holds for the Janus metaphor. Its force comes primarily from providing a “method of thinking” about the contradictions and puzzlements of the mobile phone and their uses.

**Conclusion: Tantalising possibilities and risks**

The image of the Janus face concludes this preliminary survey of metaphors in the mobile literature. As stated at the outset, the intention is not to provide a comprehensive account of metaphor in writing on mobile phones but, rather, present a provisional and situated analysis of the current working of the most prominent metaphors in the mobile discourse. Further development will both broaden and deepen the analysis, to include, for instance, discussion of the “walled garden” metaphor in communications policy, as well as careful consideration of tropes that circulate in the wider literature on globalisation and ICT use, all of which have a direct impact on our understanding of mobile phones. Key among these is the continuing need to challenge the “folk framing” of mobile phones as “devices that will liberate individuals from the constraints of their settings” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002, p. 7). In addition, future work can also embrace analysis of the impacts and existing critiques of the network metaphor (Wallemacq, 1998; Nas & Houweling, 1998; Knox et al., 2006), the mobility metaphor (Favell, 2001; Wolff, 1993), and what seems to be the metaphor du jour, the concept of “convergence” (Jenkins, 2006; Wirth, 2006; Wood, 2008).
Having gestured towards possible future work, then, I wish to close this paper by offering some comments on why metaphors matter.

Software and other forms of technological device design has long made recourse to metaphors, both as a way of problem solving and as a way of explaining technical capabilities to future users (Coyne, 1995). This tradition has not been without criticism, however. For at least one critic, it is a “perilous” process as it “firmly nail[s] our conceptual feet to the ground”, forever limiting the power of the device, how it is understood, and its likely future uses (Cooper, 1995).

The same general criticisms can be extended to broader uses of metaphor in the literature on mobile phones. Metaphor selection is never free of complication, and any comparison intended to clarify also has the capacity to obfuscate (“certain aspects are illuminated, others shadowed over” – Brown, 1976, p. 172). Ill-chosen metaphors – even if they don’t initially appear as such – can prove particularly detrimental in that it can determine in advance how we are likely to imagine and use particular technologies and it has the potential to confuse rather than clarify, thus failing to fulfil the very function it was employed to perform in the first place.

What is more, insofar as metaphor is intertwined with rhetoric, metaphor is never innocent, and the rhetorical uses of metaphor always influence and shape the meanings that are generated by, and the meanings which accumulate around, a given metaphor. In short, metaphors have the potential to orient research – setting the terms of reference of and agenda for research – and to fix results (Derrida, 2001, p. 17).

On the positive side of things, metaphor aims to concentrate our attention on what “emerges in the interplay of juxtaposed associations” (Brown, 1976, p. 181) and, at its best,

> It provides a new way of understanding that which we already know, and in so doing it reconstitutes from these materials new domains of perception and new languages of thought (p. 185).

In light of these “twin faces” of metaphor (to continue Arnold’s earlier example), I suggest that two interconnected endeavours are required.

The first is to undertake an ongoing critique of metaphor, which involves a certain ethics of reading (as Derrida might say), a commitment to close reading which is attentive to the
shaping force of language and/through metaphor, and which interrogates metaphor and language (Derrida, 2001, pp. 17-18). In such a process, it needs to be recollected that it is only possible to critique metaphor from within, by working with and against metaphor, recognising its limits and working at these limits. Using such an approach to analyse in detail each of the metaphors surveyed here will shed considerable light on the nature and direction of mobile studies.

It is in this context that Janet Wolff (1993, p. 235) suggests that an effective critical strategy might be the reappropriation rather than the avoidance of existing metaphors. Equally, we ought to think carefully about our choice of vocabulary, being especially cautious of terminology that is liberatory in some ways but restrictive in others (p. 235). In other words, as Donna Haraway (1991, p. 150) would say, there is merit in taking “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, and for responsibility in their construction”.

The second endeavour is the need for the invention and selection of new metaphors. Just as it is important to read backwards (asking, among other things, “How is this history of metaphor possible?” – Derrida, 2001, p. 17), it is equally important to read forwards, probing what futures and future metaphors are possible. This is to acknowledge that metaphors are not static (Wolff, 1993, p. 235). It is also to recognise the vitality of metaphor (with ‘vitality’ intended here in a double sense, suggesting importance to and animation of discourse) and the ongoing relevance of metaphor to understanding technologies and the techno-social.

Neither of these tasks is easy, however. On the one hand, “to unmask metaphors requires negative insight and circumspection” (Brown, 1976, p. 176). On the other hand, “to create new metaphors is a leap of the imagination” (p. 176). The “pivotal point”, though, as Brown makes clear, is that metaphor must “retain its consciously ‘as if’ quality … for on it turns the difference between using metaphors and being used by them”. It is this sense of the continual “as if” that must be carried with us as we engage with metaphor and other figures of speech in our critical dealings with mobile phones and all socio-technical interactions.

References


3 As Brown (1976, p. 170) argues, all knowledge is in some way metaphoric and that “the formal representation of social reality … is through and through metaphoric”.

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