

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: ETHNOGRAPHY AND METAPHORS

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One of my colleagues once argued that everything the Khanty say is metaphorical. But how could he tell? Although we both felt then, in the mid-1990s, that our comprehension concerning Khanty sensitivity was superb (also rather different for both of us), our ethnographic skills were still in their infancy.

To claim so one needs to know Khanty life rather well. An ethnographer and a Khanty forest dweller need to have something sufficiently common on which to build an understanding of metaphor. You can comprehend only if your indigenous research partner can share some significant experience with you that enables the replacement of meaning. Scholars have struggled with metaphor since Aristotle, and although we thought we had captured the meaning of everything that could be found in the Khanty forest scene, the Khanty never said anything directly. How accurate was our comprehension?

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson brought the understanding of the heuristic potential of metaphor to the wider scholarly scene in 1980 with their book *Metaphors We Live By*. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5), the core of “metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”. They did not consider metaphor simply as a tool for describing reality, “upon which lived human experience has no bearing” (Ó Laoire 2000: 33), but as a hub of everyday experience and existential proposition. For Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 118), metaphors concern “the deepest questions of what we as human beings are and how we understand our everyday world”, because human reflection is extensively metaphorical (ibid.: 127–128). The combination of the ordinary and the essential gives to metaphor the functional intensity and power to define what we perceive as reality (ibid.: 146).

Scholars have reflected a lot on the arguments of Lakoff and Johnson. For example, Peter Norvig (1985) criticises their approach for going too far from the initial meaning, saying that metaphors are “artifacts of language use, and have nothing to do with meaning or understanding”. Treating the whole human conceptual system as metaphorical, Lakoff and Johnson arguably fail to demonstrate how this model on understanding relates to other modes of comprehension. Norvig sees weakness in the abstract nature of Lakoff’s and Johnson’s model of metaphor, which cannot convince sceptics who search for applicable details for the theory (ibid.). Accusations of ambiguity might be a reaction to Lakoff and Johnson’s unconventional approach to metaphor. Mikhail Lotman (2011: 11) acknowledges acts of trivial speech practice as models and stereotypes that were treated metaphorically by Lakoff and Johnson.

Lakoff and Johnson have also received criticism for applying the concept of metaphor as not fully conscious, but automatic. Arguably, this indicates that the handling of metaphor lacks the intellectual dimension in speech practice (see Ó Laoire 2000: 34). Elías Sevilla Casas (2002: 27) emphasises purposeful use of metaphor in their discussion of the language of scientific discourse. Sevilla Casa relies on the analysis provided by Clifford Geertz (2000: 95–107) concerning difference in the views of anthropologists belonging to the Western and Indigenous worlds. Geertz stresses the problem of the not fully conscious general discourse (postmodern, positivist, colonial, structuralist) that scholars inevitably represent. However, the general nature of discussion and the non-conscious use of metaphor, as argued by Lakoff and Johnson, makes the theory fruitful for further ethnographic and anthropological consideration.

On the wave of representation crisis in anthropology, arguments were proposed regarding metaphors shaping ethnography (Marcus 1998: 92) and interpretation serving as a metaphor for the research process (Marcus and Fischer 1999: 26). This implies an aspiration to detect the social correlations and associative reasons that are most evident in language use. Ethnography is designated and observed through open metaphorical connections. Such an approach enables the connecting of locations of cultural production that are not indisputably related to each other. (Marcus 1998: 92–93)

Metaphor facilitates the use of poetic methods to bridge the gap between obscure human experience and ethnographic knowledge (Sevilla Casas 2002: 3). Metaphor also produces connections between diverse individual understandings (*ibid.*: 9). Without metaphors we cannot see these relations because such links may suggest associations between very different areas of life and culture. According to Paul Ricoeur (1994: 6), one of the core functions of metaphor is to produce connections between semantically distant phenomena, specifically: “the semantic innovation through which a previously unnoticed ‘proximity’ of two ideas is perceived despite their logical distance must in fact be related to the work of resemblance.”

Consequently, metaphor is a specific tools with which to conduct field ethnography or analyse ethnographic practice. Because of parallel knowledge production, ethnographers may even be forced to use metaphor. Ethnographic knowledge is not produced through theories but mainly by narrating allegorical and metaphorical stories in the field (Clifford 1986: 98–100; Sevilla Casas 2002: 25–26). James Clifford (1986: 109) also notes that ethnographic field studies are not only metaphorically a scientific “laboratory” but also a personal “rite of passage”, involving simultaneously a quest for objective and individual truths.

The problem of truth is a significant challenge to ethnography in comprehending the circumstances of life. Clifford (1988: 97) claims that human relationships are often expressed through the most vigorous metaphors, although using exaggerated models causes uncertainty regarding their adequacy. Perhaps the most suggestive discussion of the connection between truth and metaphor was produced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1989: 250):

What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations, which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and which after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions.

Despite Nietzschean irony and the attempt to remain truthful, ethnographers employ customary metaphors (Clifford 1988: 93, 97). Without the possibility to edit fieldnotes, one's experiences and statements may appear disturbing and ambiguous. Clifford considers as the most significant example of such ambivalence the cognitive confusion that followed the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork diaries (see Malinowski 1967). Suddenly the approach that had been a model of description for ethnographic experience appeared full of contradictions (Clifford 1988: 97).

Metaphors are good for stylising an ethnographic experience and adapting fieldwork impressions to the expected cognitive horizons of the audience. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 156) suggest that metaphor has the potential "to highlight and make coherent certain aspects of our experience". Through metaphor we understand, but also construct, reality (ibid.: 159). The truth is connected to metaphor by coherence between narrated experience and real life (ibid.: 174). One important quality of metaphor stands in its potential to enable readers to understand described situations (ibid.: 179). Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors operate if they bring the ethnographer's experience closer to readers: "Metaphors are basically devices for understanding and have little to do with objective reality" (ibid.: 184).

Thus, metaphor is suitable for analysing ethnographic fieldwork experience if we avoid overly high cognitive expectations regarding the truth. Metaphors serve well to depict ethnographic everyday experience, but not for big existential challenges. When tackling metaphor we must not expect to find answers to questions regarding reality and truth. If so, my friend was right, and metaphor served him as a tool of understanding. But it did not bring him closer to the truth.

Christos Varvantakis and Sevasti-Melissa Nolas (2019: 365) argue that metaphor plays a key role in "communicating what happens to us in the course of the research and our subsequent sense-making practices". Metaphor enables an analysis of the ethnographer's implicit, embodied, and emotional condition during field studies. Through metaphor, we can conceptualise the fieldwork practice and react creatively in unexpected situations, see the ethnographic encounter through a playful and experimental prism and facilitate knowledge production (ibid.: 365, 368). In addition to employing metaphor to theorise about the general process of ethnographic investigation, it also has the potential to support the conceptualisation of fieldwork situations: "each research project, or set of research encounters, may produce new or different metaphors for understanding fieldwork and analysis. What is important is that role of metaphor is made more transparent in the research process." (Varvantakis and Nolas 2019: 369)

Authors of field notes do not always think in terms of metaphor: readers themselves may attribute a metaphorical mode to some statements. In certain circumstances, metaphors serve academic freedom and it must not be rejected from diaries in favour of more strict scientific discourse. Metaphor enables ethnographers to bridge the gap between human experience and ethnographic knowledge using poetic methods. (Sevilla Casas 2002: 3–5)

Connecting knowledge and human experience is possible because metaphor relies on a certain configuration of a priori knowledge. Clifford (1986: 119) argues that the ethnographic evidence makes "sense only within patterned arrangements and narratives, and these are conventional, political, and meaningful in a more than referential sense". Metaphors may induce a play within existing frames of reference, thus not enabling the creation of easily recognisable new knowledge.

On the ethnographic scene, we may face “an over-emphasis on the praxeological function of metaphor” (Sevilla Casas 2002: 27). Ethnographers can execute their imaginative potential by using metaphors and detecting metaphoric expressions in their informants’ narratives, being motivated by their own creative ambitions (Geertz 2000: 102). Metaphor enables ethnography to resemble poetry.

Ricoeur (1994: 173) considers metaphor “the trope of resemblance par excellence”. Because similarity works as a primary force of metaphor, it is complicated to detect a heuristic potential in metaphoric thinking. Social context and language tools overlap in the process of using metaphors (ibid.: 176). If not an obvious choice for the creation of new arguments, metaphor still facilitates perception of culture-specific nuances. It helps us think about everything twice, bringing us closer to the motivation of the storytellers because “resemblance is not only what the metaphorical statement fashions, but also what guides and produces this statement” (ibid.: 193).

Metaphor enables us to reveal an ethnographic truth in complicated situations when scholars encounter cognitive or ethical challenges while trying to handle their field experiences or the process of comprehension directly. Metaphor may also reveal nuances of knowledge that remain unnoticed when one applies a stricter academic writing style. Marking resemblance allows us to detect the possibility of new knowledge. Metaphoric expressions may also fail and indicate absence of cognitive potential at some point, although metaphor does give the potential to play with undertones of truth and meaning.

After several trips to the Khanty, I started to do ethnography among the Komi, the language relatives of the Khanty who live on the western side of the Ural Mountains. I became friends with a few Komi hunters. They told me a multitude of hunting stories, and in a few cases also revealed how to understand these rather cryptic narratives. I must admit that these instructions were as enigmatic as the stories themselves.

Then, seeing me hopelessly struggling with comprehension, one of my friends decided to simplify the puzzle. He told me that hunting is like army service (FM 2014). That was an elegant way to put the issue, almost in Lakoff’s and Johnson’s style. They did not propose a metaphorical model, something like ‘life is war’, but several similar ones as ontological metaphors. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 25–32). Fine, but what could that mean?

One possibility for interpretation is that this statement relates Komi hunting to “the struggle with harsh northern nature” (Konakov 1983: 176). My friend hunter had read Konakov’s monograph and in another conversation presented Konakov’s evidence about the application of customary law among Komi hunters at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries as his own experience (FM 1996). Why not this time?

Komi hunters do not see that they go to the forest as to war, at least not because of dangerous game, challenging landscapes, or bad weather. There were serious conflicts between different groups of hunters in the past (up to the 1940s), but this had little to do with the natural conditions. Violent disagreements were caused by contradictory understanding of hunting rights and too great a number of hunters, causing overhunting and damaging everybody’s chances of making a decent catch. (Sidorov 1997 [1928]: 41–44; Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 209)

Oleg Ulyashev argues that Komi hunting artels function as arenas “for intensive communication of oral lore” (Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 208). He claims that hunting

and army service constituted the core of Komi men's poetic and epic heritage. These two themes were close, and hunting magic even dominated the heroic epic: "The hunt may be poetically compared with the battle field as a comparable site for the application of the supreme forces of the hero" (Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 209; Il'ina and Ulyashev 2009: 100–101; see also Sidorov 1997 [1928]: 50–51).

But my friend was not talking about struggle with the forest environment, conflicts between hunters, or even about the hunting epic. His notion, approximating hunting and war, was connected to the rules of narrating one's experience – you talk about hunting practice similarly to army service. His meaning was that in the same way that you do not talk directly about your army experiences, you also need to avoid straight-forward description of hunting episodes. This Komi hunter "secret language" is abundantly documented (Konakov 1983: 192–193; Il'ina and Ulyashev 2009: 104–112). The narrative rules of the hunters do not concern only prohibitions regarding some topics or the euphemistic naming of humans and animals. My friend referred to more nuanced rules of storytelling (regarding intentional confusion) that I have tried to analyse elsewhere (Leete and Lipin 2015).

The Komi hunters' metaphoric pattern prescribes silence on certain subjects and deliberate distortion of others in their stories. It is complicated to ask exactly how their narrating works, and for the hunters complicated to answer. This is so because one is not supposed to know exactly what the other hunters do, and hunting stories resemble reality.

Therefore, metaphoric statements serve well to explain these rules of narrating. But then you need a shared frame of reference for mutual comprehension. Metaphorical understanding is rich, but also limited in a certain sense. Metaphor unleashes fiction's power to re-describe reality (Ricoeur 1994: 6–7). To grasp the meaning, one needs to know the code (ibid.: 179–180) and for us, the army was the code. When applying this mode of comprehension, metaphor appears as a narrow gate to understanding.

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials of the author, Komi Republic, Kulömdin district.

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