WORLDLY KNOWLEDGE
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHERS
ISSN : 3030-332X IMPACT FACTOR (Research bib) – 7,293

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EXPLORING THE METAPHORS OF TECHNOLOGY

Abstract. This article explores the use of metaphors across various linguistic domains, illustrating their profound impact on technology. By examining the use of metaphors in various linguistic contexts, we aim to understand how these figurative expressions shape our understanding of technological terms that we are immersed in on a daily basis and its structure. Apart from discussing about metaphorical language of technology, this article investigates and analyzes some metaphors in every day conversations as well. The results reveal that metaphors play a crucial role in conceptualizing abstract technological concepts, facilitating communication, and reflecting digital literacy. The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on the importance of metaphor in this specific linguistic domain research and its potential implications for daily and cross-cultural communication.
Keywords: metaphor, linguistics, digital technologies, figurative language, cross-domain mappings.

A metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical effect, directly refers to one thing by mentioning another. [1] Metaphors are a fundamental aspect of human language, allowing us to understand and describe abstract concepts through more familiar terms. By mapping one domain of experience onto another, metaphors enrich our communication, enhance our understanding, and influence the way we perceive the world. Metaphors are such expressions that is utilized to refer to something not in terms of a literal meaning but figurative meaning.

Metaphors are powerful linguistic tools that bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, making complex ideas more accessible and relatable. Whether in science, technology, business, or literature, metaphors shape our understanding, influence our perceptions, and enrich our communication. By recognizing and appreciating the role of metaphors in various domains, we can better navigate and articulate the complexities of our world.

Metaphors not only enhance our language but also our cognitive abilities, allowing us to think more creatively and understand more deeply. They are not just figures of speech but fundamental to human thought and communication, underscoring the profound connection between language and the way we experience reality. The domain of computing is particularly rich in metaphor, for both cognitive and aesthetic reasons. Regarding the former, many laypeople are confused by technology, and complain of "technostress". Metaphorical terms allow users to associate unfamiliar and perhaps "scary" concepts with old, "comfortable" ones. [2]

Digital technologies are essentially related to metaphors, but digital metaphors are different from linguistic ones in important ways. Linguistic metaphors are passive, in the sense that the audi-ence needs to choose to actively engage the world proposed by met-aphor. Returning to the Shakespearean metaphor “time is a beg-gar,” the audience is unlikely to understand the metaphor without cognitive effort and without further engaging Shakespeare’s prose. Technological metaphors, on the other hand, are active (and often imposing) in the sense that they are realized in digital artifacts that are actively doing things, forcefully changing a user’s meaning hori-zon. [3]

[1] "Definition of METAPHOR". Merriam-Webster. Retrieved 29 March 2024.
[2] Metaphorical Internet Terms in English and French. Ingrid MEYER, Victoria ZALUSKI, Kristen MACKINTOSH, Clara FOZ, School of Translation and Interpretation, University of Ottawa

Metaphors play 6 more pivotal roles in order to make technology understandable. The first one is Simplification of Complex Ideas. Technology often involves intricate processes and abstract concepts that can be challenging for non-experts to grasp. Metaphors simplify these ideas by drawing parallels to familiar experiences or objects. For example, describing computer networks as "digital highways" helps people visualize the flow of information.

The second one is Enhancement of Understanding. Metaphors create mental images and analogies that resonate with people's existing knowledge and experiences. This makes it easier for them to comprehend how technology works and how it affects their lives. For instance, comparing software updates to "house renovations" helps users understand the need for periodic improvements.

The third role is Improving the Communication. By using metaphors, technical experts can communicate complex ideas more effectively to a broader audience. Metaphors act as a shared language that facilitates communication between experts and non-experts, reducing misunderstandings and enhancing clarity.

Aiding Memory and Recalling is the fourth of roles of metaphors. Metaphors make information more memorable because they connect new knowledge to familiar concepts. When people can relate a technical term or concept to something they already know, they are more likely to retain and recall that information later.

Cultural and Emotional Connection. Metaphors can evoke emotions and cultural references, making technical concepts more engaging and relevant to people's lives. For example, describing cybersecurity as "digital locks and keys" taps into a universally understood concept of security and protection.

The last one is Shaping Perceptions and Attitudes. Metaphors not only explain how technology works but also influence how people perceive and interact with it. Positive metaphors can foster trust and acceptance, while negative metaphors may create skepticism or fear. Generally, metaphors serve as powerful tools in demystifying technology by translating complex ideas into familiar language and experiences. They enhance understanding, facilitate communication across diverse audiences, aid memory retention, and shape perceptions—all of which are crucial for promoting digital literacy and fostering informed decision-making in our increasingly technology-driven world.

Now let’s have a look at some examples of technological metaphors which we face on our everyday life.

1. **Desktop**: Refers to the primary user interface of a computer, mimicking a physical desktop where items can be arranged and accessed.
2. **Virus**: Describes malicious software that can infect and damage a computer system, similar to how a biological virus infects a living organism.
3. **Cloud**: Refers to storing and accessing data and applications over the internet, drawing a parallel to a cloud in the sky where data is stored out of physical reach.
4. **Cookie**: A small piece of data stored on a user's computer by a web browser, akin to leaving crumbs (or traces) of activity.
5. **Firewall**: A network security system that monitors and controls incoming and outgoing network traffic, similar to a physical barrier that prevents the spread of fire.
6. **Bug**: A flaw or fault in software that causes it to malfunction, originally derived from actual insects causing issues in early computers.
7. **The Web of Connection**: This metaphor compares technology to a web, illustrating how it connects people and information across the globe.

8. **A Symphony of Bytes**: This metaphor suggests technology as a symphony of bytes, harmoniously working together to create digital solutions.[4]
9. **A Global Village**: This metaphor suggests technology as creating a global village, shrinking distances and fostering global communities.
10. **The Digital Orchestra**: This metaphor portrays technology as a digital orchestra, with various technologies working in harmony to create progress.
11. **Surfing the Web**: Browsing the internet, likened to riding the waves on a surfboard.
12. **Recycle Bin**: A location where deleted files are temporarily stored, similar to a trash bin that can be emptied or from which items can be retrieved.
13. **Bandwidth**: The amount of data that can be transmitted over a network, compared to the width of a road determining traffic flow.
14. **Spam**: Unwanted or junk email, named after a processed meat product that was often unwanted or considered low-quality.
15. **Hub**: A central device that connects multiple devices in a network, analogous to a hub in a wheel that connects spokes.
16. **Worm**: A type of malware that replicates itself to spread to other computers, akin to an earthworm burrowing through soil.
17. **Gateway**: A network point that acts as an entrance to another network, similar to a gateway that allows passage between different areas.
18. **Screenshot**: A digital image of the display screen, like taking a photograph or snapshot of what is shown.
19. **Breadcrumbs**: A navigation aid used in websites to show the path taken by the user, similar to leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to find one's way back.
20. **Dashboard**: A user interface that provides a summary of various data points, similar to a car's dashboard that displays critical information to the driver.

These metaphors help users better understand and visualize abstract or complex technological concepts by relating them to familiar objects or ideas.

In classical theories of language, metaphor was seen as a matter of language not thought. Metaphorical expressions were assumed to be mutually exclusive with the realm of ordinary everyday language: everyday language had no metaphor, and metaphor used mechanisms outside the realm of everyday conventional language. The classical theory was taken so much for granted over the centuries that many people didn't realize that it was just a theory. The theory was not merely taken to be true, but came to be taken as definitional. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings. And in the process, everyday abstract concepts like time, states, change, causation, and purpose also turn out to be metaphorical.[5] For example: " **IDEAS ARE MONEY**" Let me put in my two cents' worth. He's rich in ideas. That book is a treasure trove of ideas. He has a wealth of ideas. [6]As George Lakoff and Mark Johnsen said before, every day we are likely to use many metaphorical examples to make our conversation more vivid and relatable.

This a dialogue between two friends discussing a technical problem on their phones.

Alex: "Hey, Chris, I'm having a bit of a nightmare with my phone. It's acting up again."

Chris: "What's going on this time? Is it another software glitch?"

[4] https://engdic.org/metaphors-for-technology/

[5] Meaningful Technologies: How Digital Metaphors Change the Way We Think and Live Lever PressISBN: 978-1-64315-042-0 Fernando Nascimento Bowdoin College

[6] The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor George Lakoff 1992

Alex: "Yeah, **my phone has a mind of its own**. **It's been freezing and crashing, like a ship caught in a storm."**

Chris: "Ugh, that sounds rough. My phone was doing something similar last week. **It was trying to run through quicksand** every time I opened an app."

Alex: "Exactly! It's as if **my phone's brain is a tangled web of confusion**. I've tried rebooting it, but **it's still slow as a snail**."

Chris: "Have you checked if it's a storage issue? Sometimes, it's **like trying to stuff an elephant into a closet** if you have too many apps or photos."

Alex: "I cleared some space, but it's still misbehaving. It's like **the ghost of old software updates is haunting my phone**."

Chris: "Maybe you need to do a factory reset. It's like **hitting the reset button on a video game,** giving you a fresh start."

Alex: "I'm a bit hesitant to do that. It feels **like jumping off a cliff without a safety net**, losing all my data."

Chris: "Don't worry, just back up your data to the cloud. It's **like storing your valuables in a safe deposit box**. You can retrieve them anytime."

Alex: "Good point. I'll try that and see if it calms the stormy seas my phone's been sailing through."

Chris: "If that doesn't work, maybe it's time to upgrade. Sometimes you just need a new ship to navigate **the ever-changing ocean of technology**."

Alex: "True, but I'm hoping it doesn't come to that. This phone has been my trusted companion, like a loyal sidekick on a tech adventure."

Chris: "I get it. But remember, even sidekicks need a break sometimes. Keep me posted on how it goes!"

Alex: "Will do. Thanks for the advice, Chris. Here's hoping my phone can find its way out of this digital maze!"

Here is the explanation of metaphors with meanings. "It's like my phone has a mind of its own." This means that the phone is behaving unpredictably and uncontrollably and adds a sense of mystery and frustration about the phone's behavior. "Freezing and crashing, like a ship caught in a storm."- The phone's performance is unstable and erratic and emphasizes the severity and chaos of the technical issues.

"Trying to run through quicksand." - The phone is slow and unresponsive which conveys the difficulty and frustration of using the phone. "Phone's brain is a tangled web of confusion." –it means that the phone's software is malfunctioning or overwhelmed and highlights the complexity and disarray of the technical problem. "Trying to stuff an elephant into a closet." - Meaning: The phone's storage is overfilled, causing performance issues. Illustrates the impracticality and impossibility of the situation.

As previous software issues are causing current problems. Alex used a metaphor that "the ghost of old software updates is haunting my phone" to creates a spooky and persistent image of software

issues. Chris saying that "hitting the reset button on a video game" describes the phone and simplifies the concept of resetting the phone and starting over.

"Jumping off a cliff without a safety net." Alex used this metaphor to express his hesitation and taking a risk without protection or backup which emphasizes the danger and uncertainty of losing data. "Storing your valuables in a safe deposit box." This means backing up data to a secure and accessible location.

It is the fact that we spontaneously and without any intention use a lot of metaphors to navigate and articulate the complexities of our world of technology.

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