

Men Are Grass: Bateson, Erickson, Utilization and Metaphor

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Abstract

The relationship between metaphor and the practice of utilization in therapy and hypnosis can be seen as dependent on metaphor's role in structuring experience. The work of Gregory Bateson and others is used to illustrate how metaphor functions. Bateson's comparison of two forms of syllogistic logic provides a background for distinguishing between the experiential effects of metaphor in contrast to the categorical thinking inherent in simile and analogy. Clinical examples are given to demonstrate how utilization is structured by metaphor, particularly as Bateson has described it in his analysis of the *Sylogism in Grass*.

Keywords: Utilization, metaphor, syllogism, abduction, hypnosis, therapy.

We do not judge that this or that thing is necessarily disturbing. We can only wonder what use can be made of it. Milton H. Erickson (1985, p. 257).

Are there necessities of poetry without which prose is pathogenic? Gregory Bateson (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 51).

Metaphor is ubiquitous. Just as one cannot *not* communicate (Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967) one cannot *not* communicate metaphorically. Language and concept formation depend on metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). If one accepts these propositions, then the practice of hypnotherapy, a discipline so inextricably bound up with language and communication, requires an understanding of how metaphor functions. The

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relationship of hypnotherapy and metaphor has been well-documented (Brown, 1991; Coombs & Freedman, 1990; Lankton & Lankton, 1983), especially among Ericksonians. This paper will look more closely at the connection between metaphor and the practice of utilization, taking for its frame of reference Gregory Bateson's (1972, 1979, 1987, 1992) ideas regarding metaphor in the context of systems theory. Utilization as a foundational principle in Ericksonian hypnotherapy will be defined and illustrated. The following points regarding metaphor will be emphasized:

1. Metaphors establish connections that do not require conscious mediation.
2. The kinds of connections metaphors create result from a mapping of structure onto structure.
3. In contrast with simile and analogy, metaphor generates relations of equivalence not comparison.
4. That two things can be seen as equivalent (via metaphor) is more important than showing they belong to a shared category.
5. Utilization depends in large part on this process of connecting two (or more) aspects of experience by means of metaphoric equivalence.

First, a clinical anecdote:

A nine-year-old boy referred to me because of long standing encopresis revealed in a session that he has an uncle who is a foreman on construction sites. This uncle can operate all the various forms of heavy equipment and has let the boy ride along with him; even handle the controls on such exciting things as bulldozers and excavators. When I learned this I asked him what these machines do with the dirt they pick up.

- Boy: They dump it into the dumptrucks.
Andrew: Then what happens?
B: The dumptrucks take it to the place, the dump or whatever, and drop it out.
A: They dump it?
B: Yeah, what else should they do with it?
A: Quite right. But how do they know where to dump it and when?
B: They just know. They're not stupid.
A: You mean they know where to dump it. They don't just dump it wherever or whenever? They do it in the right place at the right time?
B: Of course, what do you think?

The dialogue continued in this vein until we had established that I was somewhat dense and he was quite expert on the subject of dumps and dumping. Never was mention made of bowel movements, going to the bathroom or anything of the sort in this or subsequent meetings. Yet from that session on his father informed me that the boy rarely again had an accident.

Utilization and Metaphor

The Ericksonian principle of utilization has been described by Erickson and others (Erickson, 1980a, 1980d; Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Flemons, 2002; Gilligan, 1987; Lankton & Lankton, 1983; O'Hanlon, 1987). In his 1952 paper, "Deep Hypnosis and Its Induction,"

Erickson asserts, “whatever the behavior offered by the subjects [*sic*] it should be accepted and utilized to develop further responsive behavior” (1952/1980a, p. 155). This parsimonious statement suggests that utilization in its basic form is the acceptance of *what is* for the purposes of *what can be*. It is a pragmatic willingness to make use of what the client presents – symptoms, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, emotional reactions, and so forth – on behalf of the client’s interests. Utilization makes possible significant contextual shifts in relation to problems such that new action and/or meaning can arise, at times startlingly so. Such contextual shifts require bridges from one experiential domain to another. These bridges are constructed of metaphor.

Utilization relies profoundly on the ability of metaphor to structure reality and to do so at a preconceptual (Johnson, 1987), preverbal (Bateson, 1991), and unconscious level. In their seminal text, *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson define metaphor succinctly: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (1980, p. 5).

Metaphor is, as Johnson writes (1987) “...a pervasive, irreducible, imaginative structure of human understanding that influences the nature of meaning and constrains our rational inferences” (p. xii). As a preconceptual aspect of our cognitive structure as physical organisms, metaphor functions largely outside conscious awareness (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). It forms part of the background organizing structure from which meaning gets its conceptual shape (Johnson, 1987). Utilization depends on the ability human beings have as cognitive agents to transpose aspects of one kind of experience into another. Metaphor can be seen as one significant means by which this process takes place. How else to explain the bridge from physiological function (“taking a dump”) to construction equipment (dumprucks, and so forth) and their operation?

A metaphor creates an equation of two things. By contrast, a simile or analogy, through the use of words such as ‘like’ and ‘as’, establishes a comparison. A metaphor does not comment on the relationship it indicates; nor does it imply a comparison of the specified domains. Love is not *like* a rose – love *is* a rose. Boys are not *like* dumprucks – boys *are* dumprucks. As Bateson puts it,

When we say a nation “decays,” we are using a metaphor, suggesting that some changes in a nation are like changes which bacteria produce in fruit. But we don’t stop to mention the fruit or the bacteria (1972, p. 56).

Syllogism in Grass

Poetry is not a sort of distorted and decorated prose, but rather prose is poetry which has been stripped down and pinned to a Procrustean bed of logic (Bateson, 1972, p. 136).

Before proceeding further with the relationship of utilization and metaphor, I wish to present Bateson’s (1987/88, 1991) analysis of what he called the *syllogism in grass*. Utilization as a practice flows from the structure of this oddly poetic, seemingly illogical form.

A syllogism is logical formula, essentially a triplet consisting of three sentences: the first two are premises or antecedents, the third a conclusion or consequent (Lagerlund, 2004). Aristotle and later philosophers refined these forms to produce a system of classical logic in which valid arguments could be constructed. Interestingly, the validity of the argument depends more on its form than its content. While a full description of the syllogism and the principles of deductive logic is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that fallacious claims (about content, e.g. unicorns) can be made utilizing valid logical forms.

The relevance of this to hypnosis will be touched on later.

Bateson contrasted the following two examples of syllogistic logic to make an important point about living systems. The two syllogisms are:

Syllogism in Barbara¹

All men are mortal

Socrates is a man

Socrates is mortal

Syllogism in Grass

Grass dies

Men die

Men are grass

The syllogism in Barbara is considered an example of classic deductive logic. It makes a clear distinction between member (Socrates) and class (men) and is, in most conceivable respects, completely acceptable. The syllogism in grass uses a syllogistic structure but arrives at what seems an absurd conclusion. Men and grass both die but are men grass? According to convention, the category of grasses does not include men, nor conversely.

Bateson argues that the syllogism in grass more accurately represents living systems than the logic of Barbara with its strict distinctions between member and category; distinctions that occur, as he notes (1991), in language but not in the natural world. The relationship between men and grass is a metaphoric equivalence; but that equivalence is not simply a poetic device. As Brown (1991) indicates, Bateson sees metaphor as,

“...the mental equivalent of biological information transduction. He compared the way in which metaphor encodes meaning to the way in which information is processed in the biologic world. Structuring information in terms of similarity and differences is the fundamental biologic organization (p. 148).

Bateson emphasizes that with words it is possible to “[jump] right out of metaphor and poetic mode into simile,” and in doing so, to abandon the affordances of metaphor for the rules of proper logic and syntax. “In a word, it becomes *prose*, and then all the limitations of the syllogisms that logicians prefer...must be precisely obeyed” (1987, pp. 28-29 and in Brown, 1991 p. 149).

Contrast the grass syllogism with one following proper form below:

All living things die

Men and grass are living things

Men and grass die

Grass and men are properly in the same category of living things. The connection is logical, the argument is now valid, but what is its worth? Bateson argues that the logic of Barbara has scant relevance to the biological and, in human terms, experiential world where metaphoric relations – the mapping of structure onto structure – prevail. Bateson seems to use the grass syllogism as a kind of koan, a perturbation for his readers. It is evocative, and to be affected by its poetic, metaphorical quality is the only way to get beyond its illogic and thus become available for what it makes visible.

Erickson’s case of the terminally ill man, Joe, and the tomato plants (Erickson, 1980d) is worth examining in this light. This case is often used to illustrate Erickson’s interspersal method of suggestion, but it also shows the extent to which he built up a metaphorical bridge between two domains - the careful taking care of a tomato plant, and the management of chronic debilitating pain - without having to make an explicit or logical

connection between the two. Erickson was informed ahead of time about Joe's hostility to the very word 'hypnosis' and thus made every effort to work with him in a conversational, decidedly informal manner². With foreknowledge of Joe's historical trajectory from a boy peddling flowers to a successful florist, Erickson utilized his own knowledge of plants as material on which to structure his work. The interspersed hypnotic suggestions for comfort and relief of pain were laid upon a scaffold of suggestions about the growth of a tomato plant from seed to stalk to leaf and flower and fruit. Erickson's artfulness lay in his ability to generate this sort of equivalence as an experiential, not simply an intellectual, reality for this suffering man. A Barbara-like rendering of the relationship of a tomato plant to a person would unlikely yield the same effect.

Metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), Johnson (1987) and Lakoff (1987), argue, is not simply a poetic device, but a central component of how persons organize and come to understand their worlds. Metaphors are structures, what Johnson (1987) calls "image schemata³," providing sets of formal relations that are then projected onto a wide range of contexts. These metaphor structures make it possible for experience to be coherent and consistent, such that how a person comes to understand something depends in large part on a process of mapping a previously known structure onto that new domain. The known structure of gardening, horticulture, the total context of sun, seed and soil was mapped, in Erickson's example, onto the context of Joe's physical suffering.

When my nine year old client started in on the topic of dumptrucks and heavy machinery we fortuitously evoked a connection between two seemingly disparate realms:

Dumptrucks take dumps
Boys take dumps
Boys are dumptrucks

The structure of a boy that allows for proper bowel continence and the use of a toilet and the structure of a dumptruck, which in this sense entails its function and proper use, became equated in this example. Though no formal hypnosis was employed in this case, my assumption is that the equation took place outside the boy's conscious awareness. I did not make the connection explicit, nor did he; we never commented on the relationship between bowel control and dumptrucks. It is highly likely that had I made the connection explicit he would have rejected it out of hand.

A further example will highlight the relationship between metaphor and utilization.

What, if any, connection is there between an arm lifting and a penis becoming erect? In conducting therapy with a man with a non-organically based erectile problem a therapist might go about constructing a hypnotic interaction that includes arm levitation. But what bearing does arm levitation have on this problem?

The category of all body parts that can become erect includes all 'members'; the penis, like the arm, is a member; therefore, the penis can become erect. While this seems to follow nicely it is, nevertheless, specious logic. It is obvious that an arm and a penis are two different physical structures that require different physiological process to achieve the effect of levitation or erection. An arm rises through neuromuscular coordinations. A penis rises because of blood flow triggered by nervous system arousal. While they may both belong to several of the same categories – body parts, appendages that can lift, and so forth – they are also quite distinct from one another.

Of course arms, if they are properly functioning, can lift. What does that have to do with penises?; precious little unless one equates arms and penises. To do so by way of

simile seems not to offer much – “Your arm can lift; your penis is like your arm.” The connection via simile has scant value as the category relation between arm and penis, in this case, is a rather tenuous and general one. It tells the client something interesting (and obvious) but is likely of little use in helping him achieve an erection.

For the utilization of arm levitation to be of value a significant relationship of relevance must be established, convincing enough to the person on an unconscious level, that the two domains can connect. The connection has to be a felt-connection, not merely an intellectual one. The rising of the arm in trance does not *stand for* the rising of the penis – the rising arm *is*, by virtue of metaphoric relation, the rising penis.

Arms lift

Penises lift

Arms are Penises

Again, this is a matter of metaphoric equivalence, however specious the logic, not categorical comparison. Arms can lift involuntarily - penises can lift involuntarily (as any adolescent boy can tell you), arms and penises can lift involuntarily. Erickson, Rossi and Rossi (1976) refer to this as implication. One thing implies another. The individual is led, by implication, to an evoked, felt-connection that had not yet been tapped as a resource. The fact that the connection is logically specious has no bearing on the therapeutic value of the link. It is persuasive even if logically fallacious, just as the image of “a tree whose hungry mouth is prest/against the earth’s sweet flowing breast” (Kilmer, p. 18) is affecting despite the categorical differences (or similarities) between and trees and nursing infants (or soil and lactating breasts for that matter).

Of course, evoking this kind of equivalence may be simply one part of a larger therapeutic conversation that will enable the individual to achieve erection. What is evoked through the connection is a sense of possibility, of attainability; it (arm levitation/penile erection) *can* happen; now it is a matter of other factors (emotional, contextual, and so forth).

In his later writings Bateson made use of the term *abduction*, borrowing it from the American Pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce, as a “word for that part of the process of inquiry which proposes that a given set of phenomena is a case under some previously proposed rule” (1991, p. 186). He was searching for a term that could capture what he saw in the natural world, both in the developmental process from DNA to organism and in the correspondence of structures among diverse forms of life, as “the pattern that connects.” Bateson may not have succeeded in nailing down a consistent, applicable use of this term, but his efforts point in a direction relevant for the understanding of why utilization is such a powerful method for evoking therapeutic change.

While the word *analogy* bears a family resemblance, abduction points toward a domain of connection that is harder immediately to discern. That domain has more to do with the kind of formal, or structural, relations that obtain among seemingly disparate phenomena. These are the kinds of relationships that metaphor both creates and evokes. The point is not to find a category that includes two (or more) seemingly unrelated phenomena (e.g. arms and penises) – as if now establishing a ‘truth’ in ‘objective’ reality – but to evoke a connection that provides a new piece of experiential reality, a ‘truth’ that, in William James’ phrase, has “cash-value in experiential terms”⁴ (1994, p. 97). Utilization puts this new piece of experiential truth to work.

This pragmatic definition of truth does not suggest an “anything goes” approach to constructing these kinds of metaphoric connections. The criteria of experiential truth depends on the degree of coherence (Rorty, 1991) and usefulness if affords for a particular

context (in this case, therapy). Men and grass, boys and dumptrucks, tomato plants and physical comfort, even arms and penises are formally similar enough to suggest categorical relations, however thinly stretched, but it is not in the categorizing and sorting that a therapeutic value is to be found. It takes a poet (or a good enough therapist-client system) to make these similarities meaningful, experientially-felt, and transformative.

Erickson's (Haley, 1985) case of the boy who achieves bladder control is another example of the relationship of utilization and metaphor. In this case, Erickson did not talk about enuresis or urinary continence at all with this boy. Instead he talked with him about archery, baseball, and about various kinds of muscles and their functions.

You know when you draw back on your bow string and aim your arrow, what do you suppose the pupil of the eye does? It closes down, tightens up. You see, there are muscles that are flat, muscles that are round. Muscles that are short. Muscles that are long. And there are muscles that are circular. Like the one at the bottom of your stomach. You know when you eat food, it closes up. The food stays in your stomach until it's all digested (pp. 129-130).

Erickson sets up an implied relationship between the sorts of muscles in the eye and stomach and the achievement of bladder control. The pupil of the eye and the sphincter muscle share "abstract components of description" (Bateson, 1979/80). They are evocative of each other metaphorically, and share functional components: opening/closing, widening/narrowing, releasing/containing, and so forth. They are also natural functions that operate without conscious effort.

Erickson's indirect suggestion that the boy could easily develop bladder control came about through the metaphoric equivalence of various body parts that do different things but share formal, functional characteristics. The relationship was meaningful to the boy, presumably because archery and the physiological processes Erickson described were evocative of skill, mastery and pride. The resources bound up in archery and other body processes were available for urinary continence.

The abductive logic of the above case is present in the *boys are dumptrucks* example. Skill, pride, and mastery (even if imaginary) in one domain transfer to skill, pride and mastery in another. A particular learning (to shoot a bow and arrow, to run an excavator, and so forth) is an instantiation of the larger category of learning-to-learn (or deuterio-learning, in Bateson's phrase [1972]). A particular learning carries within it the components, the formal structure (the having learned-to-learn), of a variety of other possible particular learnings.

In another example I saw a 45 year old man who requested help with chronic premature ejaculation. He had accommodated to this problem over the years, but now felt pressure to resolve it because his current girlfriend held the attitude that a) he could get over it if he really tried, b) it represented a kind of selfishness on his part (he would get his satisfaction while she did not), and c) if he did not address it she would leave him. He was highly motivated to keep the relationship. In our first few meetings he revealed a history of somewhat compulsive masturbation. He consistently felt both an anxiety about ejaculating prematurely and about *not* being able to ejaculate (also about not achieving an erection, something that had happened on a few occasions). When he masturbated he did not ejaculate immediately but would do so in varying amounts of time. As anxiety seemed to be a large coloration of his sexual experience, I spent the first three trances working with him on his relationship to the experience of anxiety (Roffman, 2003). On each occasion I found opportunities for seeding the idea that he could enjoy "not having to come⁵."

In the fourth trance, the following happened. He arrived a bit late because of traffic and was eager to get started. I suggested that we could take our time, *just as he could take his time, because there wasn't any real need to hurry*. This was the beginning of the induction, already isomorphic to the solution. I then facilitated a deepening of the trance and picked up on the driving/automobile imagery that he had started the session with. I suggested that while driving, one has a lot of control over the speed and direction of the car; that without much conscious thought one simply adjusts the speed and direction based on the road ahead, the other cars, and so forth. I then mentioned, in various ways, how a person puts on the brake when the car goes too quickly, when one needs to slow down, and applies the accelerator anytime it makes sense to speed up; that one can shift gears according to what's needed, into drive, neutral, even reverse and park – or on a manual transmission from 1st to 5th or downshift from 5th to 1st. I added that sometimes it is nice to put the car in cruise control and just enjoy the ride at the same speed. I talked about enjoying the ride in various forms, enjoying the ride without worrying about the destination which one would surely reach. I mentioned a familiar trip that sometimes takes 2 hours, sometimes 4 depending on traffic or what route I take.

As one can imagine, the metaphor of driving, enjoying the ride, slowing down and accelerating, knowing one will reach the destination in good time, all were easily connected to sex, to achieving orgasm at a reasonable time (whatever that is), to not having to worry, and to enjoying one's competence. Of the many possible variations on the men are grass triplet, the following is obvious:

Driving involves regulation of speed
Sexual intercourse involves the regulation of speed
Driving is sexual intercourse

This client had no difficulties or anxieties associated with driving, and generally did it well enough not to have to think about it. Over the next few sessions he reported more instances of prolonged sex without premature ejaculation, but perhaps more importantly, a sense of ease with not having to have sex.

Certainly not all instances of utilization as Erickson and others have used the term correspond so readily to this notion of the syllogism in grass. In many of Erickson's famous cases, the utilization is of a direct sort; he takes the person's behavior and has them continue to do it in some different context and thereby changes the meaning and outcome of the behavior. The individual who seems determined not to go into trance is given the instruction, "keep those eyes open, more and more open; and don't let them close..." Such suggestions are a direct utilization of what the client is doing in the moment. In those instances behavior A (problematic) becomes behavior A₁ (purposeful/useful) and as such, is no longer the same behavior.

In the clinical examples above the problematic behavior is utilized only in terms of its potential for abduction: for its metaphoric structure to yield another image, idea, concept that is formally the same – such as pupils and sphincters, or a dumptruck depositing its payload and a boy "taking a dump." In these examples, meaning A becomes meaning B rather than A₁. What is utilized are the abstract components embodied in some other form, or more simply put, something standing for something else.

Yet even in the "eyes open" hypnosis example given above, the structure of the syllogism in grass can be seen to fit.

Eyes closed – go into trance
Eyes open – go into trance
Eyes open are eyes closed

One can readily notice the presupposition – that either condition leads to trance.

Summary

Life, perhaps, doesn't always ask what is logically sound. I'd be very surprised if it did Gregory Bateson (1991, p. 241).

There is elegance to these kinds of grass-like formulations that makes them aesthetically attractive and powerful. Much of the creative use of hypnosis derives from the deftness with which the therapist and client can spin a metaphoric web to capture the resources necessary for the problem at hand. The logic of the grass syllogism is illogical when matched up with the kind of linear thinking that is associated, perhaps incorrectly, with “rationality” and conscious process. As Johnson (1987) argues, rationality has much more to do with metaphor and how it structures experience than is generally given consideration. Human experience might even best be characterized as mostly *nonrational* (Shweder, 1984). Neither rational (in the usual sense) nor irrational (non-sensical, absurd), nonrationality presupposes a meaningful coherence that stands on its own, much like a work of art, or a religious ritual, or a cultural tradition. This nonrational certainly pertains to what transpires in therapy and hypnosis. The logic of utilization shares more with poetry than prose (Bateson, 1972, Brown, 1991).

But whether you approve or disapprove of poetry, dream, and psychosis, the generalization remains that biological data make sense – are connected together – by syllogisms in grass. The whole of animal behavior, the whole of repetitive anatomy, and the whole of biological evolution – each of these vast realms is within itself linked together by syllogisms in grass, whether the logicians like it or not.

It's really very simple – in order to make syllogisms in Barbara, you must have identified classes, so that subjects and predicates can be differentiated. But, apart from language, there are no named classes and no subject-predicate relations. Therefore, syllogisms in grass must be the dominant mode of communicating interconnection of ideas in all preverbal realms (Bateson, 1991, p. 27).

Communicating interconnection of ideas is, as Flemons (2002) argues, a large portion of what therapists strive to do. Metaphor is what establishes interconnection so that men are grass, arms are penises, boys are dumptrucks, driving is sex, and so many other imagined and yet-to-be imagined relations of therapeutic consequence.

The syllogism in grass is a form but not a formula. Metaphors are ever-present in client-therapist conversation as are these grass-like forms. They do not have to be contrived or pre-planned. Utilization flows from acknowledging and responding to what is present and making use of it on behalf of the client's interest.

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Footnotes

¹Classically, different modes of syllogism were given names. The Syllogism in Barbara refers to the mode of syllogism that says A belongs to all B, B belongs to all C, therefore A belongs to all C.

²See Zeig's (1985) discussion of this case for an interesting take on the ethics of Erickson's procedure.

³"Image schemata exist at a level of generality and abstraction that allows them to serve repeatedly as identifying patterns in an indefinitely large number of experiences, perceptions, and image formations for objects or events that are similarly structured in the relevant ways. Their more important feature is that they have a few basic elements or components that are related by definite structures, and yet they have a certain flexibility. As a result of this simple structure, they are a chief means for achieving order in our experience so that we can comprehend and reason about it" (Johnson, 1987, p. 28). Johnson further states that "even though schemata are definite structures, they are dynamic patterns rather than fixed and static images" (p. 29).

⁴The full quote from William James is, "'Grant an idea or belief to be true,' it [pragmatism] says, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?'" (1994, p. 97).

⁵"Come" was his word for ejaculation. Of course it has multiple other meanings that were evocative for him in this therapy.