# THE THERAPEUTIC METAPHOR - AN INTERDICIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

**Irina CRUMPEI, Assistant, PhD, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi**

*Abstract: The empirical research on the use of metaphor in clinical settings has progressively developed in recent decades. Methodological limitations involved in researching this particular area caused some controversy in the reported results. Multiple functions of metaphor have been revealed over time: clarifying ideas, strengthening therapeutic gains, discovering clinical difficulties. In this article we will focus on the persuasive function of metaphor. The persuasive function has been less explored in psychotherapy, though enjoyed increased interest in other areas: marketing, political discourse analysis and social psychology. Research in neighboring fields helped defining conditions that increase the value of the persuasive message. Moreover, they clarified some of the mechanisms that activate attitudinal change mediated by metaphors. Affective, cognitive and motivational processes could explain the persuasive power of metaphors. Finally we discuss what implications these results have on the use of metaphor in clinical context.*

*Keywords: therapeutic metaphor, persuasive function, psychotherapy*

In 1985 Philip Barker observed in his work on the use of metaphors in psychotherapy the small number of scientific studies on the subject. He explained this deficiency by the difficulties raised by the controlled study of the healing function of metaphors. The decades that followed have partially refuted his hypothesis. The role of metaphor in the therapeutic change became a favorite subject in the literature (Barker, 1996; Long & Lepper, 2008). The multiple functions of the metaphor were revealed one by one over time. Clarifying the delivered messages (Clarke, 1989), strengthening the therapeutic insights (Donnelly & Dumas, 1997), uncovering hidden symptoms (Rasmussen & Angus, 1996) are just some of the functions described.

In this article we will focus on the persuasive function of metaphor. The persuasive function of metaphor has been less explored in psychotherapy, although it has enjoyed increased interest in other areas: marketing ( Roehm & Sternthal, 2001), political discourse analysis (Voss et al., 1992) and social psychology (Ottati et al., 1999).

## Empirical studies of the therapeutic metaphor

The empirical study on the use of metaphors in clinical settings has progressively developed in recent decades. Methodological limitations raised by researching this particular area determined a number of controversies in the reported results (McMullen, 1996). McMullen (1996) observes that one idea constantly discussed is the lack of a direct relationship between the number of metaphors used and the therapeutic outcomes. The metaphor is useful for reaching certain clinical endpoints and should be used for its precise purpose (McCurry & Hayes, 1992).



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)

The first studies on the therapeutic metaphor analyzed metaphor usage patterns in the therapeutic interaction in relation to therapeutic outcomes (Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Barlow et al., 1977). It was found that figurative language and metaphors appeared sporadically, in regular, repetitive structures associated to problem solving and developing main themes. Figurative phases were interlaced with large spaces of literally speech which described and deepened the metaphor facilitated insight. After the therapeutic session, metaphors are stored in an "associated meaning context" together with evoked memories, thoughts and emotions (Angus & Rennie, 1989).

Only a few studies researched the use of metaphors in psychotherapy. Results usually support metaphor's effectiveness. Clients would remember easier sessions when metaphors were used and considered them more useful (Martin et al, 1992). The reported arguments for these assessments included increasing emotional awareness, clarifying objectives, establishing relationships between ideas and an optimal relationship with the therapist. Advice containing metaphors was assessed as more persuasive and useful than those expressed literally (Donnelly & Dumas, 1997). Subjects valued figurative advice as superior to literal advice for multiple reasons: they put the matter in a new light, suggesting new solutions, offering a different perspective on the problem and clarifying the problem by making it easier to understand. When participants were asked to write down all details they remembered about each session, it was found that participants in the "metaphor" condition remembered more about the advice while participants in the "literal" condition remembered more about the stressor. Suit & Paradise (1985) investigated the impact of metaphors on the client's assessment of the therapist. Participants were divided into four different conditions according to the therapist's response: non-metaphorical, complex metaphor, narrative metaphor and cliché. Participants in control and narrative metaphor conditions evaluated the therapist significantly more positively in terms of empathy, competence and overall impression compared to those in the cliché condition. These results indicate the negative impact of using clichés and the ineffectiveness of complex metaphors. The authors also noted the similar results in the conditions "control" and "narrative metaphor". Weak defined results that support the lack of impact of the metaphor on client's perception of the therapist are reported in Reitenbach's study (2000) which used a similar design.

Studies cited above support metaphor's organizing role, the function of clarifying goals and suggesting strategies to solve problems. Metaphors' reframing function, its power to shed a new light on old problems, has been repeatedly reported. Also, interventions using metaphors are easier to remember and understand. However, the actual change in attitudes mediated by the use of metaphors was insufficiently studied in the clinical and therapeutic context. The persuasive function of the metaphor was, however, empirically studied in adjacent fields.

**What makes a persuasive metaphor?**

Bringing together the results of 29 studies on the subject of the influence of metaphor, regardless of their theoretical perspective, with a total of nearly 4,000 subjects, Sopory and Dillard (2002 ) analyzed the persuasive impact of metaphors in a meta - analysis. Beyond the main effect analysis, the authors considered some moderating variables: number of metaphors



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)

used, length, position, target familiarity, novelty, the presentation and the credibility of the source. Considering all these factors, the authors synthesized several important conclusions.

They found that metaphorical expression was significantly more persuasive compared to literal language. Despite significant differences, the effect size was modest at less than 1%. The authors point out that this percentage is comparable to those reported for other variables investigated in persuasion literature. The same effect size is reported for the superior efficacy of bilateral messages containing rejection of counterarguments compared to unilateral messages (Allen, 1998 cit. The Pfau & Dillard, 2002). Moreover, the predictive power of metaphorical language increases when it meets certain rules of use. In these circumstances the use of metaphors explains up to 17% of the variance in attitudinal change (Sopory & Dillard, 2002). Through the analysis of moderator variables, Sopory and Dillard facilitated the synthesis of several conditions that increase the persuasive value of the message:

- Using a single metaphor has a greater impact on changing attitudes than using multiple metaphors. The more crowded the message, the less efficient it is.
- Complex metaphors that describe, repeat and detail as much as possible characteristics of its elements, always keeping the same target and source, are more effective than simple metaphors, mentioning the comparison elements once.
- Metaphors are associated with a significant change in attitude when located at the beginning of the message than when situated inside the message or at the end.
- Metaphors are most effective when the public is familiar with the source, the figurative term. Metaphors must be customized to the recipients' knowledge and characteristics. This is especially true in psychotherapy.
- Metaphors using new, surprising, unusual associations of terms are more persuasive than those using known, common associations. Well known, widely used metaphors have a minimal impact on individuals' attitudes.
- Metaphors are more efficient heard than read.
- Metaphors are associated with higher attitude change when used by people with low credibility, than when used by people with high credibility.
- Metaphors enhance transmitter's credibility. However, of the three components of credibility: competence, character and dynamism, metaphors mostly enhance positive assessment of dynamism.

Frey and Eagly (1993) reached similar conclusions even if they expressed them in a different manner. They reported that the intensity and the complexity of a message undermine its persuasive power. Providing ready-made information and images limits cognitive processing and message ownership for the audience. Summarizing the features of an elaborated message, they come to contradict the principles for an efficient metaphorical message as described by Sopory and Dillard (2002). Elaborated messages use many metaphors to support a point of view, up to six in a paragraph. Almost all metaphors are clichés and are not conceptually related to the defended argument. These findings are supported by Sopory and Dillard's results describing efficient metaphors as singular, repetitive, with surprising associations of terms, unknown to the listener.



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)

**Mechanisms of metaphor's persuasive function**

The power of metaphors has been reported since the time of ancient rhetoric when figures of speech were used for their ability to sneak into the judges' minds (DeRosa, 2007). Metaphors' mechanisms act at multiple levels: cognitive, affective and motivational.

From a cognitive point of view, metaphors facilitate structuring and organizing information (Mio, 1996; Read et al., 1990). The link found between the metaphor's two terms evokes a wide range of connections in the listener's semantic memory (Whaley, 1991 cit. in Sopory & Dillard, 2002). Well-chosen metaphors provide a base for structuring subsequent arguments, connecting the information in a coherent and meaningful manner. This optimal organization ensures a better understanding and retention of the message. Individuals have a more favorable attitude on messages containing metaphors and their tendency to counter decreases (McQuarie & Mick, 1992). Processing the metaphors requires a superior cognitive effort, which facilitates its persuasive power. The multitude of connections generated by joining together the metaphor's two terms, limits the cognitive space for formulating counterarguments.

Metaphors also persuade by stimulating affective reactions (Sopory, 2005; DeRosia, 2007). Studies show metaphors generate a positive attitude towards the message due to the tension – release process (Reinsch, 1971). The positive emotions mediate the metaphor's persuasive impact. Metaphors are literally false and deviate from the logical, concrete reality. The newer and the more unusual, the higher the initial tension they arouse. The perception of the literal error and the ambiguous context, require cognitive effort. The tension will be released when the metaphor's meaning is elucidated. Solving the metaphor provides intrinsic satisfaction generating positive emotions that are transferred on the message strengthening its acceptance (McQuarrie & Mick , 1992; Sopory & Dillard , 2002).

The motivational perspective on the persuasive function of the metaphor is based on the idea that it increases the speaker's credibility. Studies from the 60s reported a positive assessment of the speaker's creativity, reflected on his/hers credibility (McCroskey & Combs, 1969). Speaker's credibility would lead to easier acceptance of the message. However, Sopory and Dillard (2002) showed in their meta-analysis that individuals don't appreciate more favorable the speaker's competence and character, but only his/hers dynamism. Besides the results reported by Frey and Eagly (1993) indicate frequent use of metaphors in common speech. They often are clichés without intrinsic creative and intellectual value. Their mere use would not justify an increase in the credibility of the transmitter.

**Implications for the use of metaphor in psychotherapy**

The results presented above suggest that the effectiveness of metaphors in psychotherapy depends more on the content and quality of the message delivered, than the credibility of the therapist who delivers it. When the relationship is not yet well-established and the client seems to be reluctant to self-disclosure, the metaphor could be the solution to deepen the relationship.

To increase the impact of the therapeutic metaphor, it is recommended to choose a single association of terms to illustrate the idea to be delivered and to repeat it in different forms. Overcrowding the speech with metaphors that vary the compared terms can have the opposite effect. The metaphor should be used to introduce the intervention it represents. Thus,



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)

further ideas will be structured around the cognitive support provided by the connections evoked by the metaphor. The ideas will be easier to organize and to remember over time. This argument is also supported by other research showing that the use of metaphors in therapy increases retention of therapeutic events and insights (Martin et al., 1992). The therapist should use surprising metaphors that encourage new cognitive connections. Thus the reframing function is also fulfilled, providing the client with a new perspective on the problem (Donnely & Dumas, 1997). The novelty of the metaphor is useful in facilitating two of the persuasive mechanisms mentioned above. Firstly solving it will require cognitive effort, limiting the client's possibility to develop counterarguments. Secondly, the unusual association of terms will build an ambiguous context associated with tension. Finding the solution to the metaphor will generate positive emotions reflected on the delivered message and on the client's wellbeing. Although the association between the two parts of the metaphor should be new to the client, the terms itself should be familiar and relevant to his/hers problem. The metaphor should be customized to the client's socio-cultural background.

**Bibliography**

Angus, L.E., & Rennie, D.L. (1989). Envisioning the representational world: The client's experience of metaphoric expression in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 26*, 372-379.
Barker, P. (1985). *Using metaphors in psychotherapy.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.
Barker, P. (1996). *Psychotherapeutic metaphors: A guide to theory and practice*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
Barlow, J.M., Polio, H.R., & Fine, H.J. (1977). Insight and figurative language in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice, 14*, 212-222.
Clarke, K.M. (1989). Creation of meaning: An emotional processing task in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 26*, 139-148.
DeRosia, E. D. (2007). Rediscovering theory: Integrating ancient hypotheses and modern empirical evidence of the audience-response effects of rhetorical figures. In E. McQuarrie & B. J. Phillips (Eds.), *Go figure! New directions in advertising rhetoric* (pp. 23-50). Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
Dillard, J. P., & Pfau, M. (Eds.). (2002). The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Donnelly, C.M., & Dumas, J.E. (1997). Use of analogies in therapeutic situations: An analogue study. *Psychotherapy, 34*, 124-132.
Frey, K.P., & Eagly, A.H. (1993). Vividness can undermine the persuasiveness of messages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 32-44.
Long, P.S., & Lepper, G. (2008). Metaphor in psychoanalytic psychotherapy: A comparative study of four cases by a practitioner-researcher. *British Journal of Psychotherapy, 24*, 343-364.
Martin, J., Cummings, A.L., & Hallberg, E.T. (1992). Therapists' intentional use of metaphor: Memorability, clinical impact, and possible epistemic/motivational functions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 60*, 143-145.
McCroskey, J. C. & Combs, W. H. (1969) The effects of the use of analogy on attitude change and source credibility, Journal of Communication, 19(4), pp. 333–339.



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)

McCurry, S.M., & Hayes, S.C. (1992). Clinical and experimental perspectives on metaphorical talk. *Clinical Psychology Review, 12*, 763-785.
McMullen, L.M. (1996). Studying the use of figurative language in psychotherapy: The search for researchable questions. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity, 11*, 241-255.
McQuarrie, E. F. & Mick, D. G. (1999) Visual rhetoric in advertising: text interpretive, experimental, and reader-response analyses, Journal of Consumer Research, 26(1), pp. 37–54.
Mio, J. S. (1996) Metaphor, politics, and persuasion, in: J. S. Mio & A. N. Katz (Eds), Metaphor: Implications and applications, pp. 127–146 (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum).
Ottati, V., Rhoads, S., & Graesser, A.C. (1999). The effect of metaphor on processing style in a persuasion task: A motivational resonance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 688-697.
Pollio, H.R., & Barlow, J.M. (1975). A behavioral analysis of figurative language in psychotherapy: One session in a single case study. *Language and Speech, 18*, 236-254.
Rasmussen, B.R., & Angus, L. (1996). Metaphor in psychodynamic psychotherapy with borderline and non-borderline clients: A qualitative analysis. *Psychotherapy, 33*, 521-530.
Read, S.J., Cesa, I.L., Jones, D.K., & Collins, N.L. (1990). When is the federal budget like a baby? Metaphor in political rhetoric. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity, 5*, 125-149.
Reinsch, L.N. (1971). An investigation of the effects of the metaphor and simile in persuasive discourse. *Speech Monographs, 38*, 142-145.
Reitenbach, D.M. (2000). The effect of metaphor and psychological reactance on the counseling relationship. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 60*, 3577.
Roehm, M.L., & Sternthal, B. (2001). The moderating effect of knowledge and resources on the persuasive impact of analogies. *Journal of Consumer Research, 28*, 257-272.
Sopory, P., & Dillard, J.P. (2002). The persuasive effects of metaphor: A meta-analysis. *Human Communication Research, 28*, 382-419.
Sopory, P. (2005). Metaphor and affect. *Poetic Today. 26*(3), 432-458.
Suit, J.L., & Paradise, L.V. (1985). Effects of metaphors and cognitive complexity on perceived counselor characteristics. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 32*, 23-28.
Voss, J., Kennet, J., Wiley, J., & Engstler-Schooler, T. (1992). Experts at debates: The use of a metaphor in the U.S. Senate debate on the Gulf crisis. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity, 7*, 197-214.



BDD-V546 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:46 UTC)