

## Knowledge Metaphors

Simona VASILACHE

Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, România

[simona.vasilache@fabiz.ase.ro](mailto:simona.vasilache@fabiz.ase.ro)

*The paper discusses knowledge metaphors as necessities in conceptualizing knowledge, posing, at the same time, a series of problems of understanding, in a domain characterized by fuzziness and multiplicity of interpretations. A classification of main knowledge metaphors is proposed, pleading for their proliferation, as far as they infuse useful subjectivity and insight in a field which can't be approached purely rationally.*

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### 1 A metaphor of metaphors

Knowledge is the metaphor of metaphors. If we accept the paradox that knowledge is what we don't know, what we still have to invent or discover, the metaphor, by means of which we compensate for knowledge we do not have, and "discuss the intangible in terms of the tangible" (Abrams, 1958: 31), while, at the same time, we create perplexingly new knowledge employing "the living power of metaphoricality" (Ricoeur, 2004: 129) is the perfect illustration of this ignorant knowledgeability. In other words, if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, knowledge lies not in the unlimited universe, but in our limited capacity of apprehension, which we extend by metaphor. Our concepts, our creativity, which is essentially metaphor-based, our selves are the ones at stake when theorizing knowledge. And I make the proof of this perspective with the presumably most famous metaphor of our cultural background: the one in the insolvable question of the Sphinx. What is the simile-being that the deadly riddle points at? The transforming (isn't the metaphor, literally and symbolically, a transformation?) human self. So, the answer to the question, which is, for Oedipus, the first bar from the symphony of destiny, ended up in regaining his damned identity, is one and the same with *know thyself*, the milestone of classic philosophy. Or, even better said, *recognize thyself* in the metaphor. Some can, some can not. And the distinction between the *seers* and the *blind* is notorious in the knowledge tradition.

Still, what do we see? What is really there, or

what we are enabled to see? "We have first raised a dust, and then complain we cannot see" (Berkeley, 1710: 74) is, *mutatis mutandis*, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. Trying to know something alters the obscure nature of what you want to know, making your knowledge obscure. It is the first type of tension between *knower* and *knowledge*. The second type of tension is illustrated by Plato's *Theaithetos*, where Socrates relates that Thales fell into a well, while absent-mindedly watching the stars. But, don't stars reflect into wells? The reproach made to Thales, that "he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven, that he could not see what was before his feet" is, actually, sadder than that. Pursuing knowledge as such, we repeatedly fall into its reflection. Finally, the third type of tension is the closest, in spirit, to the idea of metaphor. As metaphors create realities on pre-existing gaps, human quests create knowledge on pre-existing presumptions. The words Isabel of Castile has said to Columbus, *if that land does not exist, God will create it to reward your boldness*, and *Star Trek's* contemporary mission, "to boldly go where no one has gone before", express the same idea, that novelty reveals every time when someone tries.

Based on these types of metaphorical relationships between the *who* and the *what* of knowledge, I construct, in the following, a classification of knowledge metaphors, the most natural (isn't knowledge the first *taboo* which has to be metaphorically addressed to?) and the most complicated, because they are tautological, of our mental constructions.

## 2. Classes of knowledge metaphors

A systematic enumeration of all knowledge metaphors is beyond the scope of this paper. What I propose, based on mental models (Bratianu and Murakawa, 2004; Senge, 1990) is a hierarchy of knowledge metaphors, from the most simplistic types to the more elaborated metaphoric understandings of knowledge.

### Static and deterministic metaphors (“knowledge is there”)

This class of metaphors is illustrated by the *tree of knowledge*, something which exists, as a promise, but which is forbidden, or banned. The secret language, asking for deciphering (Champollion’s hieroglyphs, for instance), or the golden ratio, the ciphers, in any sense, are laic splinters of the Paradise lost. Proto-scientific discoveries are based on this way of reasoning, presuming that there is a perfect block of knowledge which survived after the Fall, and which can be found and restored, provided that some obstacles are passed over. But what is typical to this sort of metaphors is that obstacles are not defeated by means of a quest, they rather involve a static effort of understanding, or the determination to break a well-established rule. What is going to happen, once the rule is broken, or the barrier removed, is known in advance.

The knowledge as light, as source, belongs to this paradigm. It is the so-called unreflected knowledge (Andriessen, 2008), our conscious knowledge. And what else grants the tree of knowledge to the first people, if not conscience?

### Pseudo-dynamic and probabilistic metaphors (“knowledge is not there”)

This class comprises all the metaphors of *knowledge as reflection*. The reflection can be visual – knowledge as mirror, knowledge as mirage, or auditory – knowledge as told by the oracle, knowledge as echo. This knowledge is tricky and doubtful, which gives it a certain dynamism, but this perceived dynamism is illusory, as the fake dimensions of space and time in the mirror. Actually, there isn’t anything that the knower can do in order

to influence the quality of this knowledge which, like the shadows on the walls of the cave, in Plato’s *Republic*, is just the imperfect copy of what we should really know. The baroque knowledge, nurturing illusion and subjectivity, dismisses ciphers. Knowledge is not there, and science’s need of certainty is disregarded, in a first impetus of what will become contemporary relativism.

Knowledge as intuition, the way it was defined by Sartre (1943:180), taking a purely subjective perspective, in which *the real is the realization*, fits partly into this second class of metaphors.

### Dynamic and probabilistic metaphors (“knowledge emerges here and there”)

This is the wide class of *knowledge as path*. Several sub-classes have to be defined here.

First, there is the linear perspective of the *meta odos* (along the path), which gave *the method*. Although the dynamism of the method is limited – knowledge is sequentially created, the method does not guarantee for its results. There is a probability to work, and a probability to fail, which distinguishes it from the *abracadabra* which breaks the cipher and reveals the knowledge as light.

The pseudo-non-linear perspective is illustrated by the metaphor of the way, more general than the method, the *dao*, knowledge as experience. This knowledge on the road is created by the knower, as it can’t be taught. It is, nevertheless, received, by means of various encounters, which are also sequential, along a line. Still, the learning process which generates knowledge is a spiral (Piaget, 1970: 34), a non-linear evolution. The combination of the two gives this hybrid which I termed pseudo-non-linear knowledge metaphor, which superposes a non-linear transformation over a path which, no matter how tortuous, is still a line.

Finally, the purely non-linear metaphor is that of *knowledge as narrative*. Knowledge as narrative is an experience emancipated from its physical path. When you recall knowledge which was gained along a certain way, and which becomes relevant for another context, distanced in time from the original

experience, you are free to excerpt, to make connections, to clarify things from the past in the light of experiences from the future, which direct experience does not allow you to do. This story-telling approach to knowledge (Lyotard, 1979), which gave rise to the so-called second generation knowledge management (McElroy, 2003), sees knowledge as a process which combines some morphology and some chaos, as no one can predict how the story will “live” in the system of the receiver. The fragmented knowledge of the *petites histoires* is going to be reassembled following a pattern which changes with every knowledge input. And we are back to the blind man describing an elephant, as everlasting knowledge metaphor. We can't say what it is, but you will certainly recognize knowledge when you come across it. This recognition is, by no means, easier than it was to recognize a man in the riddle of the Sphinx.

To summarize, if the first class of metaphors refers to a hierarchical knowledge, with initiated and novices, the last class refers to a horizontal knowledge, experience and story-telling being open to everyone. Of course, the extractive capacity, from similar experiences, may be different (not to mention the varying depth of stories recalling the same event), but this is part of another thread of research. The first class, and partly the second, construct the mythology of the *couloir* (paved with mirrors, for an illusion of space and time), of the screen which protects/ distorts the light of knowledge. The third class, on the contrary, advances the idea of a volubilis spreading in apparent disorder, but following a pattern which breaks and is recomposed.

Of course, given that none of the metaphors is completely satisfying – as I said in the beginning, we need a metaphor of metaphors, since we have to use knowledge to explain knowledge, which is a tautological situation – the discussion is not going to end here. Very recently, after the 8<sup>th</sup> European Conference in Knowledge Management, starting from Daan Andriessen's paper on knowledge metaphors, Gurteen Knowledge took several short interviews on “your favourite know-

ledge metaphor”. The answers varied from *relationships* to *nebulous*, from *wine* to *love*. As it can be seen, these random metaphors of knowledge are striking, they have a hue of surrealism, of gratuity, everyone is simply free to design his or her metaphor, in a pluralism whose lack Schwartz-Shea (2002) reproaches to the traditional metaphors of knowledge, which ascertain only one right acceptance of the concept. This is explainable, because one metaphor is subject to infinite interpretations, and having more competing metaphors increases the fuzziness to the limit of dissolving the concept. Still, in an age which glorifies fuzziness, why wouldn't everyone be entitled to think knowledge his or her way, but share it with the others? And, if this is the case, then professor's Andriessen's theory of knowledge as love may be a direction to follow.

### 3. Conclusions

Trying to avoid the risks of complexity, various sciences customized knowledge, operating with a restrained concept, suitable for their narrow use. Still, in order to be able to particularize knowledge to a certain domain, we need to have a good command of it at the global level. Where ordinary definitions fail, metaphors may provide a solution. However, this exit is not a safe one, given that metaphors usually add ambiguity and depth to concepts they clothe, and knowledge is already multi-layered and ambiguous. A democratization of metaphor, in the sense that everyone can contribute to the metaphoric web, while enhancing the shared effects of knowledge, seems to be the future of this world-old symbolization process.

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