The Role of Figurative Language in Knowledge Management

Magdalena Bielenia-Grajewska
University of Gdansk, Poland

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this contribution is to discuss the most important issues connected with the communicative side of knowledge management. The investigation focuses on the role of figurative language in determining the way knowledge is created, acquired, shared and stored. To narrow the scope of the research, the study concentrates on metaphors and their role in various stages of managing knowledge. Theoretical investigations on metaphors in KM are supported by selected examples of metaphors in gathering, exchanging and comprehending information coming from online sources (websites, forums and social networking tools) and printed contributions (articles and books). The aim of this work is to investigate if metaphors strengthen or weaken various processes of knowledge management. In addition, the study shows which metaphors are very popular in KM and how the selected metaphorical domain may facilitate the process of coding, decoding and distributing data (at individual and social levels).

BACKGROUND

Knowledge as such can be studied by taking different methodologies into account. One of the typologies of knowledge classification encompasses the division of knowledge according to the way it is created and perceived (e.g. explicit versus tacit knowledge). The difference between explicit and tacit knowledge is that explicit knowledge is easily processed, transferred and stored, whereas tacit knowledge (often not available in a written form, difficult to observe, recognize and categorize) requires conversion into words and numbers (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Thus, language is indispensable for the creation and application of tacit knowledge since the right choice of words may

facilitate the comprehension of new concepts that, because of their unfixed nature, are difficult to perceive and disseminate (Bielenia-Grajewska, Carayannis, & Campbell, 2013b). In addition, language serves as a bridge between various spheres of life since it facilitates information flows taking place in various knowledge domains (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2012). Thus, properly selected linguistic tools may enhance the creation and understanding of novel data, also in cross-domain settings. Linguistic tools as such can be divided according to the classification of literal and non-literal language. Literal language encompasses all linguistic devices that provide direct, defined and precise meaning. On the other hand, non-literal (figurative) language does not offer univocal equivalents but relies on broader contexts and individual interpretations. Since metaphors belong to the most popular examples of figurative language, their role in KM requires a more detailed study.

METAPHORS AND KNOWLEDGE

Metaphors are often perceived by individuals as an effective tool in the hands of poets and rhetoricians. However, metaphors are a part of everyday existence, being an important element not only of communication per se but also of action and thought. Metaphors make individuals perceive one sphere of experience in terms of another, whereas cross-domain interconnections facilitate the observation of similarities between two domains within a given metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Consequently, they can be discussed from the perspective of functionality. Since they encompass symbols widely recognized by diversified stakeholders, they prove to be efficient when novel concepts or new issues have to be discussed and introduced (e.g. Bielenia-Grajewska, 2009). Taking into account the dynamic character of changes taking place in the world

of science and technology, the process of creating new words and names may not follow the speed of innovations. Thus, the usage of metaphors makes it possible to accompany the rapid development in different spheres of life by providing efficient linguistic tools (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2012). It should also be stressed that metaphors offer an understanding of knowledge regardless of one's background in a given field. For example, metaphors facilitate the dissemination of scientific knowledge to laymen (Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005). In addition, relying on metaphors can also enhance the specialized discourse among experts. Well-known domains offer immediate connotations for specialists and facilitate quicker understanding of concepts and exchange of knowledge. In addition, metaphors influence the flow of data in dynamic environments. For example, metaphors are important when it comes to understanding difficult and novel situations, also the ones involving some risks and crisis. Since metaphors limit the fear of change (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008), they prove to be useful in different stages of knowledge dissemination, especially when this concerns issues that raise fear. Discussing different domains used in health discourse, metaphors prove to be important e.g. in providing information about food-borne diseases. For example, metaphors of war used to describe diseases stress their unpredictability and power. At the same time, war metaphors can be used to stimulate patients or authorities to engage in the fight with illnesses. As Goatly (2007) states, the body can *defend itself*, *fight* and *combat*. On the other hand, travel metaphors may stress the quick circulation of diseases, regardless of geographical and social barriers. Thus, metaphors may highlight the attitude to the way risk is perceived and understood (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2014b). Another reason for the popularity of metaphors is the fact that they are attractive and, consequently, they draw one's attention more easily than other linguistic tools (Charteris-Black, 2007). For example, taking into account the sphere of investment banking, such M&A strategies as *Sleeping Beauty*, *White Knight*, *Lobster Trap* and other concepts coming from well-known fairy tales or the representatives of the animal world not only facilitate the comprehension of difficult terms but also make an individual become interested in the issue in focus (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2009). Thus, metaphors prove to be efficient in providing a reader with new concepts in modern mass-media. Metaphors in this case, used e.g. in the titles of articles or their teasers,

attract the attention of potential readers or viewers. It can be stated that they enlarge the group of those interested in science, business or technology since they make the content more attractive and easier to understand, regardless of one's expertise in the topic. Their application in mass-media is also connected with other characteristics - the possibility of offering knowledge by using a relatively low number of signs. Thus, they prove to be economical in terms of space (e.g. headlines) and time of broadcasting. This feature is also crucial in Internet communication. Thus, social networking tools also rely on metaphors to offer quick and efficient communication exchanges. This can also be observed on corporate websites - virtual spaces where companies describe their policy and organizational performance and constantly update their business profile. The above-mentioned issue of organizational strategies, goals and aims can be studied by looking at a company image through the prism of metaphors.

Metaphors and Organizational Level

Metaphors play different roles in shaping the performance of organizations in the twenty-first century. First of all, metaphors, such as *knowledge as a resource* and *knowledge as capital*, are associated with business entities and stress that knowledge is important for modern organizations (Andriessen, 2006). Secondly, metaphors highlight the profile of the company and its key values. For example, the issue of organizational metaphors can be studied using the example of the food industry. The metaphor of *organization as a teacher* underlines the role of companies in informing customers about various issues, not necessarily related exclusively to the core activities of an organization. It also shows that knowledge can be disseminated among other stakeholders, such as mass-media, potential clients and other business entities operating within the same sector. Additionally, this metaphor stresses the role of knowledge in organizations. Information on companies is also available by using other metaphors, such as *organization as a network*, *organization as a protector*, *organization as a traditionalist*, *organization as a travel guide*, and *organization as a family* (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2014a). Although the above-mentioned metaphors do not involve the issue of knowledge management itself, they can be used as a starting point for providing taxonomy of organizational metaphors. For example, the metaphor *organization as a network* can be used to discuss

Related Content

Application of Desktop Computing Technology Based on Cloud Computing
Kai Zhang (2021). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/application-of-desktop-computing-technology-based-on-cloud-computing/278707

POI Recommendation Model Using Multi-Head Attention in Location-Based Social Network Big Data
Xiaoqiang Liu (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-16).*
www.irma-international.org/article/poi-recommendation-model-using-multi-head-attention-in-location-based-social-network-big-data/318142

Design Patterns Formal Composition and Analysis
Halima Douibiand Faiza Belala (2019). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-21).*
www.irma-international.org/article/design-patterns-formal-composition-and-analysis/230302

GBSAR Geocoding Based on Bayes Theorem: Applications to Slope and Structural Deformation Monitoring
Hao Zhang, Xiaolin Yang, Shanshan Hou, Zhenan Yin, Guiwen Renand Xiangtian Zheng (2025). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-24).*
www.irma-international.org/article/gbsar-geocoding-based-on-bayes-theorem/380648

Changing Healthcare Institutions with Large Information Technology Projects
Matthew W. Guah (2010). *Breakthrough Discoveries in Information Technology Research: Advancing Trends (pp. 123-136).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/changing-healthcare-institutions-large-information/39575