The Knowledge-as-Object Metaphor: A Case of Semantic Pathology

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ABSTRACT

It is argued that a “knowledge-as-object” metaphor is predominant within knowledge management discourse and that this metaphor underlies our conceptualization of knowledge in both an external sense and an internal sense. This dual application of the word “knowledge” within the common context of knowledge management represents a semantic pathology, a condition which leads to confused thinking and dysfunctional problem solving. The pathology has had profound effects on our understanding of knowledge management problems and the nature of the solutions that are offered. A more balanced and unbiased approach will require that both researchers and practitioners exhibit a greater awareness of the knowledge-as-object metaphor and that they fully appreciate the pervasiveness and power of the associated semantic pathology.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor, Explicit Knowledge, Knowledge Management Practice, Meaning of Knowledge, Semantic Pathology, Tacit Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors are a common aspect of language in which abstract notions are linguistically and cognitively related to more familiar and concrete concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors involve a set of entailments which map a source domain, which is usually concrete, to a target domain, which is usually abstract. The entailments are the connections which allow for meaning to be interpreted from the source domain and then applied to the target domain. Some metaphors are used extensively within a particular culture and they represent a conceptual foundation for discourse within that culture. These types of metaphors are referred to as “conceptual metaphors” (Lakoff, 1993). Conceptual metaphors are important devices for the construction of meaning and they can have significant effects on our perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors. More broadly,
metaphors provide the foundation for the majority of our cognitive activity and therefore are essential for the functioning of human society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

In recent years, researchers have recognized the extent to which metaphors are associated with discourse within the field of knowledge management (Andriessen, 2011). This research has concluded that metaphors can be highly influential and that the results can be problematic. Andriessen (2008) described an experiment to test the effect of a given metaphor on the problems and solutions that are offered. The results of this experiment show significant differences in the problems and solutions between a knowledge-as-stuff metaphor and a knowledge-as-love metaphor. Andriessen (2008) noted that the knowledge-as-capital metaphor can result in insufficient or false argumentation. Bratianu (2011) showed how knowledge metaphors based on Newtonian dynamics can obfuscate the importance of emotional knowledge.

Metaphors have also been extensively researched within domains that are closely related to the study of knowledge, including communication and the mind (Andriessen, 2011). In terms of communication, Reddy (1979) noted the existence of a predominant metaphor which he refers to as the “conduit metaphor”. He further argued that this metaphor is at the core of a semantic pathology (Ullmann, 1957), a condition which can lead to confused thinking and dysfunctional problem solving. In studies of the mind, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) showed that a mind-as-container metaphor is associated with the concept of a disembodied mind, a dominant theme in modern discourse as well as in classical philosophy. While they do not specifically refer to the notion of semantic pathology, the authors do note the negative effects of this misleading metaphor as they provide compelling evidence that the mind is actually integral with the body.

While the field of knowledge management has made great strides, the history of the field has not been without its problems. Many knowledge management systems have been focused on externalizing knowledge in an effort to make it explicit, precise and manageable. Unfortunately, the knowledge representations associated with these systems have resulted in various limitations with regard to the ability of organizations and individuals to share and effectively integrate their knowledge.

Given the problematic history associated with metaphors of knowledge, as well as metaphors of communication and the mind, this research addresses the possibility that some of the reported problems in knowledge management may be associated with a semantic pathology which is centered around a predominant metaphor for knowledge. In particular, the objective of this research is to explore the possible connection among knowledge metaphors, semantic pathologies, and the problems that have been reported within the knowledge management field.

In the next section, we explore the knowledge management literature and prior research on metaphors in knowledge management and we argue for the existence of a predominant metaphor which we refer to as the “knowledge-as-object (KO) metaphor”. This is followed by a discussion of semantic pathologies and the extent to which the KO metaphor is at the core of a semantic pathology within knowledge management. The apparent effects of this pathology are then discussed and the potential for remediation is explored. Conclusions are drawn and implications presented for both researchers and practitioners.

THE KNOWLEDGE-AS-OBJECT METAPHOR

The extent of research on knowledge metaphors within the field of knowledge management has expanded over the past 10 years. In an early work, Andriessen (2006) performed a textual analysis of prominent knowledge management literature and he identified 22 knowledge metaphors which he classified into six categories including 1) something physical, 2) a wave, 3) a living...
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