Chapter 8
The Role of Metaphors in the Interpersonal Discourse of Online Forums

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ABSTRACT
This chapter focuses on the role that metaphors play in the social relationships of people who use CMC. We analyze the metaphors used by contributors to three different electronic fora when they refer to the process of interaction. One of our main objectives is to show that the study of metaphors allows us to understand how CMC users reach agreement as to the nature of the social space that they inhabit and what behavior is considered to be appropriate or inappropriate in such a space. This chapter will show that metaphors facilitate the construction of social life and allow CMC users to propose norms of behaviour; they also facilitate the process of identification, generate confidence in a group, and orient users to the cultural contexts in which social action takes place.

INTRODUCTION
A great deal of what we think, experience and do in our everyday lives is very much a matter of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). Metaphors play an important role in the interpretation processes of experience, especially when this is a novel experience, as is the case with CMC. Thanks to this recourse, the novel becomes familiar.

From the origins of CMC, designers and the first users of these technologies (which, as we know, on many occasions are the same) have employed metaphors in order to make their experiences comprehensible as well as to divulge their projects as socio-technical projects rather than as merely technological ones. Thus, for instance, in the mid-seventies, Lee Felsestein, a hacker who had dropped out of Berkley University, worked on the Community Memory project, whose aim was to build an I.T. system designed for communities. This
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was referred to as a “hybrid of library”, “cafe”, “municipal park” and “post office” (Roszak, 1994). Similarly, in Hiltz and Turrof’s (1993) book regarding computer-assisted teleconferences, it is said that these: “can constitute public spaces, bringing to mind an Italian villa on a Sunday afternoon” (p. 429). Rheingold (1993), one of the major pioneers of CMC and who coined the concept of “virtual community”, referred to this type of ‘social aggregate’ by means of recurring to images which are well-known to all such as a “living encyclopedia” (p.56) or, also, as “a combination of intellectual marketplace and mind-game parlor” (p.56), in the same way as The Well was understood as the biggest world conversation. The Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, normally shortened to The WELL, and located in the San Francisco Bay, is considered to be one of the first virtual communities. It is best known for its Internet forums.

Historians and sociologists of the Internet have been interested in these metaphors with the aim of analysing them as part of the social imaginary, as utopias and as a component of the analysis of culture (Stefik, 1997, Flichy, 2001). According to Flichy, for example, the Internet imaginary is organised on the basis of three grand metaphors: cyberspace as a frontier, in which this image signifies new space to be discovered and populated, the possibility of creating a new society; the community, one of the elements by which it is rooted at a local level, for the creation of common values and a basic cell of democracy; finally, the individual initiative to create one’s own business (Flichy, 2001, p. 256). These metaphors have also been interpreted as one of the ways in which societies manage their tensions and uncertainties. On this basis, the study of CMC metaphors has become a good social indicator and a mirror of our times (Dubey, 2001, p. 18).

It would be a mistake to think that with the years, as CMC becomes more popular and an ever more common and universal type of communication (in the context of our Western societies), these metaphors will no longer be necessary. However, Stefik (1997) warned a few years ago that the metaphors that people use to represent CMC will continue to be necessary for the future development of CMC, in the same way as they were in the past. Likewise, and according to Jones (1998), these metaphors are relevant “as they allow us to contemplate the history of the Internet as a project rather than only technology […]” (p. 2). Indeed, the attraction that CMC has exercised over its own designers and many of its diverse users (individuals and collectives) resides, to some extent, in the always open opportunity to construct and inhabit (new) social spaces on the basis of their needs and desires without further limits than those imposed by their own capacity to imagine. This is what Serfaty (2005) has metaphorically called “discourse’s territorialisation of the immaterial” (p.91).

In this chapter we will focus on the analysis of CMC metaphors in their most popular and everyday usage. And, to be more precise, we will only pay attention to those cases in which a group of people utilise CMC in order to create a given social space. We consider the metaphorisation of these social spaces—the fact that they are endowed with a figurative sense to be a constitutive part of any process of appropriation of group CMC.

Our first aim will be to show that the analysis of metaphors allows us to access and to understand how CMC users (users of an electronic forum, for example) manage to reach an agreement with regard to what this place is as a social space and, therefore, to what is an appropriate or inappropriate way of participating in it. Our second aim will be to show that the analysis of metaphors connects the three fundamental aspects of CMC: language, social interaction and technology. To make that argument, we shall examine two specific cases.

Our project would be of special interest to those researchers who are interested in studying the processes of constitution of online social spaces that emerge as a result of CMC.