Chapter 5

Shushes in the Parlor: Reclaiming the “Conversation” Metaphor

Erik Ellis

Stanford University, USA

ABSTRACT

In The Philosophy of Literary Form, Kenneth Burke compares scholars to the participants in an unending conversation in a parlor. Although the famous passage in which Burke expresses this metaphor highlights the need for would-be participants to familiarize themselves with a conversation before joining it, scholars in rhetoric and composition have often used the metaphor to insist that participants in academic conversations must follow particular written conventions—conventions that are often at odds with the concept of conversation. In doing so, scholars overlook or conceal their ideological agendas and serve as de facto guardians of the parlor, etiquette police who shush even the most knowledgeable would-be participants—both students and scholars—who seek to join academic conversations in “inappropriate” ways. This chapter analyzes representative misappropriations of the conversation metaphor, including Graff & Birkenstein’s best-selling composition textbook They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing, and argues for a more egalitarian interpretation and application of the metaphor. By acknowledging the inadequacy of how we typically present the conversation metaphor to students and emerging scholars, we can begin to reclaim the metaphor as one that cultivates more diverse forms of inquiry and writing. Such diversity disrupts comfortable assumptions about “stable” genres and predictable pedagogies. As Boler (1999) reminded us, “Learning to live with ambiguity, discomfort, and uncertainty is a worthy educational ideal” (p.198). Educators should model this ideal in teaching and scholarship, and should cultivate it in students. To this end, we should embrace rather than fear the complexity and irreducibility of the conversation metaphor, and should write and invite students to write intellectually rigorous yet structurally flexible essays in the exploratory tradition of Montaigne. In other words, we should disrupt the notion that there is only one way to join an ongoing conversation, and should create and take advantage of opportunities to join such conversations in conversational ways.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-495-6.ch005
INTRODUCTION

Even seemingly “neutral” metaphors have ideological ramifications.— Philip Eubanks (1999, p. 437)

While holding office hours one day as a graduate student at the University of Arizona, I overheard the graduate instructor in the cubicle next to me conferencing with his students, and at first I couldn’t believe my ears. No, he didn’t say anything offensive or inappropriate per se. In fact, he spoke amiably and seemed eager to help his students. But I couldn’t get over the way he kept asking them to think of the argumentative essay they were writing as “a persuasion machine.” How ludicrous, I thought. How crude and mechanistic and dehumanizing. How macho. “It doesn’t have to be a Ferrari,” he said, “but it must be a Yugo.” To a more ambitious student he counseled, “It’s a little go-cartish, but it’s moving toward Lexus.” I cringed at each new twist on the metaphor.

This instructor was no more enlightened, I reasoned, than the other male instructor I had seen, earlier that day, wheel his female student down the long hallway, full speed, in his office chair, her squeals and giggles as socially conditioned as his masculine presumption of authority. Would he, as an undergraduate, have welcomed such a gesture by his female counterpart? Both he and Mr. Lexus were firmly in the pedagogical “driver’s seat.” As Mr. Lexus continued his “Car Talk” monologue, I felt a twinkling of self-righteous pride for knowing that I would never reduce writing to such simplistic, capitalistic terms.

Yet in the days afterward, while conferencing with my own students, I found myself envying my colleague’s metaphor - not his particular metaphor but the mere fact that he had one, that he had developed and articulated a memorable way to help students think about academic writing. Of course, all faculty use metaphors when communicating with students about their writing, albeit unconsciously. Those of us who teach writing suggest ways to fix a structural problem, to weave in a quotation, or to recast a sentence so that it will flow better. These metaphors, and countless others, arise constantly and inevitably in daily discourse. According to Ungerer and Schmid (1996), “everyday language is rife with metaphorical expressions” (p. 116). What difference does it make, then, if Mr. Lexus chose to map his metaphor from the source domain of automobile to the target domain of essay? Why should educators even bother to think about metaphors, other than to help students get their writing into running condition—or whatever metaphors we prefer?

Far more influential than individual pedagogical metaphors are the metaphors at the heart of a discipline. As Ungerer and Schmid have pointed out, “the metaphors that have unconsciously been built into the language by long-established conventions are the most important ones” (p. 119), because their linguistic invisibility often shields them from scrutiny. But what happens when we fail to scrutinize these metaphors? What happens, for example, when rhetoric and composition - a discipline intent on situating discourse and identity within the context of social construction - fails to examine the educational assumptions and implications of its key metaphors? What are the risks of failing to think meta-metaphorically?

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

The notion of conceptual metaphor, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is important here, although it offers a mixed blessing for metaphor analysis. Lakoff and Turner (1989) made the important distinction between linguistic expressions of metaphors and metaphors themselves. They argued that “metaphor resides in thought, not just in words” (p. 2). Moreover, according to Stockwell (2002), “much work in cognitive science has demonstrated that metaphor is a basic pattern in the way the human mind works” (p.