Politics and metaphor – a discourse theoretical analysis

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Introduction

Metaphors not only permeates politics but political analysis as well: Left – right, up – down etc. are not only words used within political fields but are commonly employed as concepts in scientific analysis. The literature on rhetoric and politics is blooming and there seem to be a growing awareness across the discipline of the working of metaphors in politics.

An obvious example of the use of metaphors is the recent debate on ‘networks in the shadow of hierarchy’. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) fairly quickly would notice, all the parts of this concept – ‘networks’ ‘in the shadow of’ ‘hierarchy’ - is metaphorical. ‘In the shadow’ is obviously metaphorical, what they call ‘metaphorical extension in new directions’, but also networks and hierarchy are metaphors, what they call ‘literal expressions structured by metaphorical concepts’ (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 51 and 53).

Reflecting on the Swedish ‘Account of Power’ Petersson wrote a book on ‘Power of metaphors’ (Petersson 1987), arguing convincingly not only the spread of metaphors in politics, but also the power games stemming from use of metaphors. According to the very opening line of the book, ‘language is the tool of politics’. Petersson wanted to show not only to what extent political
language is metaphorical, but also that ‘the tools of political analysis’ are metaphorical. ‘Networks’ and ‘hierarchy’ are of course ‘tools of political analysis’, but with Lakoff and Johnson, one cannot fail noticing that ‘tools’ is itself a metaphor. If however, concepts are tools, and tools are metaphors, we are facing the question of the proper place of metaphor (and other forms of rhetorical devises) in politics and political analysis. Should we maintain that metaphors are essentially derived, working on a background of non-figurative necessity, or must we draw the conclusion that politics are as such based on figurative movements, with no stable foundations below?¹

The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, I want to argue the constitutive role of tropological movements (and not only metaphors) in politics, which amounts to saying that politics is not governed by any deeper objectivity or necessity (historical laws, human essences like utility maximising or what ever). This is done, secondly, through a presentation of the concepts of empty signifier and the logic of equivalence as developed in Laclau’s discourse theory. I have certain critical remarks, which leads to the third aim, namely opening the discussion of (analytical strategic) problems of the ‘visibility of metaphoricity’ (or rhetoricity). Stated briefly, the problem is that ‘their other’, the other side of their founding distinction, literality or purity is no longer a possibility. What makes some part of signification metaphorical or rhetorical, when no signification ultimately can be seen as non-figurative, i.e. granted the status of pure denotation or?

I open the discussion by introducing two examples drawn from my own research. The first is the

¹ I don’t follow this discussion further in this paper, but I would claim that Lakorff and Johnson stops short of drawing the more radical conclusions of their own analysis. To them metaphors are derivations of more basic necessities, namely our “bodies” which gives a sort of “natural” starting point: up – down, in – out etc, are given by our bodily relations to the world. I would argue that psycho analysis as well as deconstruction makes any reference to bodily naturalness highly questionable.
construction of a community council in a small Danish village, the second is the struggles between four organisations around the introduction of so-called ‘learning plans’ in kindergartens and day nurseries. In none of the cases the working of metaphor is very obvious, but closer examination reveals that figurative logics were indeed highly present.

Second, I introduce Laclaus notions of empty signifier and logic of equivalence as theoretical tools making it possible to grasp the functioning of such figurative logics. In Laclaus writing there has been a growing awareness of the fact of the impossibility of a strictly empty signifier, something that is also revealed in my two examples. However, the analytical tool for understanding an only tendentially empty signifier has so far not been sufficiently developed in the theory. In order to help solving this problem, I propose a distinction between three levels of metaphoricity or emptyness before concluding with (a first opening) of the question of the analytically problems of observing metaphors and other figurative forms of signification.

**Two case stories**

The first case is the processes that took place around the establishing of a community council in a small village called Hylke, in Denmark (Hansen and Neufeld 2000; Hansen and Sørensen 2005). Following a series of dislocations, the processes of restructuring in a municipality (app. 20000 inhabitants) included a ‘roundtrip’ from the city council to a number of smaller villages surrounding the main town. Some of them had been parish councils before a large amalgamation reform in the beginning of the ‘70ties. In Hylke there had been a successful struggle against the planning of a great amusement park, giving the villagers a sense of being able to take part in running the village affairs. There was a huge protest when the roundtrip of the leading politicians planned to pass this village by. A village-meeting was arranged and one of the demands was the establishment of a community council. The council was organised so that the local associations had members in the
standing committee, but the projects carried out were primarily based on voluntary labour (and an amazing ability of getting money from different – often public – funds).

In order to understand the creation and working of this small council, one has to introduce the logic of metaphor. When asked whose interests the council should represent, the answer was ‘the village’. And indeed the history of being a parish council, granted the village with a pretty straightforward identity. However, when interrogating in what the specificity of Hylke consisted, its difference to the neighbouring villages – without community councils – often entered the picture. The other villages were pictured as some where the people ‘didn’t act’. In contrast to that, the self image of Hylke were hit on the spot in a song, sung a village come together and later printed in the village paper, where the refrain was ‘in Hylke, we can do it ourselves’. It appeared that this metaphor decisively helped shaping the council, in two decisive ways. First, it gave the community and the council an identity through establishing a self image, differentiating the community from its surrounding neighbours (and establishing the legitimacy of the fact that Hylke managed to obtain a set of improvements the others didn’t). Second, it worked as an organising logic of the day to day activities of the council. It became the principle the different members of the community should (im- or explicitly) invoke in order to get their specific demand on the village agenda, and in carrying out the practical task of their pursuing. In that way, ‘we can do it ourselves’ functioned as a filling of the empty signifier ‘the interest of the village’, thereby creating a chain of equivalence across the different demands and projects the council actually took up.

The second case is a struggle that went on between 4 different organisations in a period up to the passing of a bill on ‘learning plans in day care and kindergartens’ (Hansen, Bech et al. 2004). The initiative came as a reaction (one in a whole series) on the dislocations brought about by the ‘PISA’ reading tests, placing Danish children (at 3. and 9. grade) as the weakest in the Nordic countries, and in certain respects in line with children from Trinidad-Tobago. The results were later repeated
in a Nordic test, which let to a huge debate on the Danish public school, a debate which in many respect is still going on. Learning plans for day care and kindergartens were introduced in order to prepare the children better for school, in order to generally improve Danish school children’s proficiencies.

The debate around the initiative was characterized by an almost total absence of the political parties (of which there are several in Denmark). Instead is was one minister, and her Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education (but not so much the minister), the National Association of Municipalities and the Trade Union of the Pedagogy personnel in day care and kindergartens, that took part in the debate. ²

In this case the working of metaphors were perhaps more subtle, but none the less present. For a fist impression it might appear, that what was going on was simply a clash of institutionally given difference in opinion on a relatively narrow and specific policy field, the content of which to a significant degree was the task for academics and experts. However, it didn’t take much analysis to establish that the academics taking part in the debate, not only differed as much as the organisations under consideration here, but also appeared to be used quite selectively in public statements. Academic disagreements notwithstanding, the logic of metaphor permeated the debate in a way that might shake a fist impression of precision and fixity in the represented views.

On a first level, as with all political debates, ‘obvious’ metaphors were used throughout the debate.

² The organisational background produced certain particularities around the initiative. Especially the presence of the Ministry of Education was not obvious, since dare care and Kindergartens are formally a matter for the Ministry of Social Affairs. Also the very idea of learning plans is at odds with the basic Danish tradition and not least the self image of the pedagogy. Therefore the defendes of the bill, had to argue very carefully, that the bill would not turn kindergartens into “preschools’, even in spite of the presence of the Ministry of Education.
Those opposing the introduction of learning plans (mainly the Trade Union of the Pedagogy personnel, but also to a certain degree National Association of Municipalities), e.g. argued that it would prioritise ‘the head’ of the children at an expense of ‘the body’. An accusation of ‘schoolification’ of the kindergartens was also something that the protagonists had to answer to.³

On a second level my claim is that the debate on learning reveals how ‘learning’ is (ultimately) an empty signifier that can be given the most diverse contents. Very briefly stated, the point is that there is no natural or necessary signified linked to the signifier ‘learning’. From the academic debates to the public ones studied here, what is precisely shown through the different discursive attempts of establishing such link, is that learning is not a ‘phenomenon’ with an ultimate identity, but rather a field of contestation and metaphoric condensations. In the debates, two basic chains of opposition (to which the different discourses fitted in varying degrees) were established. To the first chain, in favour of a learning plan reform, the signifier ‘learning’ were linked to signifieds such as ‘literary’ (‘faglighed’ in Danish), ‘control by adults’, ‘in-learning’⁴, ‘coming from the outside’, and ‘the head’. We termed this line of argument ‘learning as in-learning’, and it found in its most pure form in the pamphlets from the Ministry of Education and in (most of) the statements from the Minister of Social Affairs. Opposed to this, the second chain argued that learning was given by its connection to signifieds such as ‘play’, ‘free childhood’, ‘development’ (rather than learning), ‘coming from inside of the child’ and primarily related to the ‘body’. It was mainly connected to the

³ Perhaps we are here closer to a metonymic sliding of signification, than to a metaphoric condensation. I return to the distinction between metaphor and metonymy later. Here it suffices to argue that a politically effective ‘figurative movement of signification’ takes place, when a notion such as schoolification appears.

⁴ There is two words for learning in Danish. If one ads the prefix ‘in’ to learning, it connotes something that come from the outside, and is mostly used in favour of literary learning.
Trade Union of the Pedagogy personnel but also to the National Association of the Municipalities.

My claim is that if it is not possible to simply dismiss either or the two positions (or any other) as false, the only possible conclusion is, that ‘learning’ has no (ultimate) necessity, but is rather a contingent historical product. In other words, there is no ‘literal’ learning lurking behind the different appearances, and what passes off for learning is in the final analysis a metaphorical condensation of signifieds, which for a given period sediments a certain contingent use of the signifier ‘learning’.

These two different cases are both examples of the working of figurative logics in political processes. In the case of the establishment of a self image of a community, where a certain line in a song manages to metaphorically represent the community. The second case both shows how metaphors in a very direct way are being used in political debates (head vs. body), and shows how the topic of the debate, the signifier ‘learning’ are open to connections with a wide area of signifieds, revealing its contingent and (ultimate) empty character. In order to theoretically account for these experiences, we now turn to the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau.

**Discourse, empty signifiers and equivalences**

Laclaus starts off from the claim that the three main tenets of philosophy, i.e. phenomenology, analytical philosophy and structuralism, at a certain point of their developments show a remarkable similarity, namely a critique of the hitherto attempts of accessing their constitutive element (the phenomenon, the referent and the sign) in a pure form. Instead leading figures in the traditions (Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Barthes among others) reach the conclusion, that ‘discursive’ (if we can agree on that term) mediation is constitutive (Laclau 1989). This means that whatever being objects acquire, it does not stem from an essential necessity ‘inside them’, but from discursive
constructions.\(^5\) In terms of our discussion this makes any discourse ‘metaphorical’ (or perhaps rather catachrestic) since its relation with ‘reality’- its denotative effects - can only be established by way of metaphorical analogy, not from any direct relation. This is what is revealed in political processes. That no signifier has a natural signified, and that any link between the two orders is to be conceived of as a contingent result of a process of fixation or sedimentation.

At this point we have to introduce metonymy in the discussion. As is well known metonymy is a relation of sliding of meaning between contiguous terms. In a (post)Saussurian theory of language, where all signification is of a differential nature, the basic functioning of signification is of a metonymical kind: in order to establish the value of one sign, we have to refer to other signs, and so on, in a (in principle) interminable movement (Derrida 1978). In sign structures we are always faced with a metonymic sliding from one sign to the others. For this sliding of floating to be arrested a set of limits and an installation of a particularity functioning as ‘universality’ is needed: in order to give a community a shape, a particular instance – another difference – needs to hold the place of the community as such (Laclau 1996). This is what is at stake in a hegemonic relationship: a particular element comes to occupy the place of the universal, and thereby to give the community (or whatever is hegemonized) an identity.

Contrary to what Laclau states (Laclau 1999), I find the hegemonic relation more in the register of

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\(^5\) Two clarifications need to be made. First, as has been pointed out numerous times, ‘discursive’ does not mean linguistic or conscious, but rather meaningful use. One might exchange the term discourse with praxis, since discursive refers to en ensemble of conscious, linguistic, behavioural and ‘material’ elements. Second, claiming the being of objects is a discursive construction does not imply the denial of their ‘existence’ independent of whether they acquire meaning. What we call a stone definitely has existence no matter if we know of it or not, but it would not be a ‘stone’, it would not even be an ‘object’ and it would be ‘there’ – in short it would not ‘be’ – if it wasn’t for a certain set of discourses enabling the use of such classificatory terms (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 108f; Laclau and Mouffe 1987).
metaphor than metonymy. Of course, any particular holding the place of the universal, is in a relation of contingent sliding with the other signifiers defining the discursive field under consideration, but the relation between the one signifier ‘standing out’ and the space it thereby constitutes, appears to be metaphorical (c.f. Glynos 1998). This is the case no matter whether we are dealing with the shape of a community or a phenomenon such as ‘learning’.

The two central concepts in the discourse theory of Laclau for grasping this foundational role of metaphor in constituting social objects are the empty signifier and the logic of equivalence. I won’t go into a detailed account of the concepts here (c.f. Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 127f; Laclau 1996). I have already noted that I find the hegemonic relationship to be more in the register of metaphor than in metonymy and I have some further critical points relating to the two concepts.

Logic of equivalence first. The concept of equivalence is based upon a logic equivalent (!) to the one presented by Marx in the argument on exchange value: the logic of the commodity establishes a relation of equivalence between ‘material distinct’ objects. But whereas Marx was able to refer to the materiality of the goods in order to establish their objective differentiation (wheat as different from jackets etc.) preventing the equivalence to be seen as a ‘simple identity’, this possibility is strictly speaking no longer available for discourse theory. ‘Materiality’ is not an essential provider of identity, and the recourse to an a priori ‘objective differentiation’ is simply not possible. We are therefore faced with the problem of establishing the ‘minimum parts’ of the larger systems. We cannot distinguish equivalence from ‘simple identity’, simply because there cannot be any simple identity. Any identity is the metaphorical condensation – and therefore repression or ‘disactivation’ – of potentially signifying differences. Again this reasoning leads to the conclusion of a primary metaphorical relation in establishing any identity, ‘dis-activating’ potential significant differences.

Perhaps this discussion simply shows how difficult it is to separate metonymy and metaphor.
My critical remarks can be summed up in the following way. So far the concept of equivalence has not been sufficiently developed, since it is distinguished from ‘simple identity’, but taking the theory seriously, we can only reach the conclusion that there can be no ‘simple identities’. So for a phenomenon such as ‘learning’ to be constructed, what takes place is not (only) a metonymic sliding of a set of signifiers, but also – and perhaps rather – a metaphoric condensation of a certain set, whereby a number of differentiated particulars (body, childhood etc.) comes to function as an equivalent chain metaphorically constituting the term, e.g. ‘learning’. This does not mean that there is no metonymy involved, it only means that in the construction of an identity there is a certain break with the continuous metonymical sliding, a stepping out of the line, that condenses a certain identity.

The interconnectedness of metonymy and metaphor is also present in the case of the empty signifier. In this case however, my reservations are of the opposite kind. I think that the empty signifier has so far tended to be presented too radically, i.e. as truly empty, thereby neglecting the element of metonymic sliding present in establishing an empty signifier (cf. Laclau 1996). That is to say, since there can be no truly emptiness, the metaphorical break with the chain that the empty signifier organizes or give a specific form to, cannot be absolute. The field that the empty signifier shapes, the floating signifiers it attempts to arrest in certain places and with certain values (in the Saussurian sense), despite their metaphorical subsuming under the empty signifier, still retains some of their particularity. It is for this reason that I have tried to work with the concept of ‘organizing metaphors’ rather than empty signifiers, when e.g. describing what was at stake in giving a (little) community a self image (Hansen and Sørensen 2005). The song line ‘we can do it ourselves’, is a metaphor for the community, but the actual content of the line, it’s ‘metonymy’, provides it with a ‘content’, an identity that makes it less than empty.

In order to meet the theoretical challenges I have tried to sketch above, I think we need to
distinguish between three levels of the working of metaphor all of which reveals a certain sence of emptiness, i.e. the unfixity of the relation between signifier and signified.

The fist level is the use of ‘obvious’ metaphorical condensations or metonymical displacements in political processes, e.g. ‘head’ and ‘body’ in the debate on learning. What this indicates is the the contingency of the phenomena under study, the fact that their identity can only be established through the use of rhetorical devises.

The second level is metaphorical condensation of chains of signifiers making up the object of the political debate or struggle. The way ‘learning’ is established by condensing a set of signifiers (either in terms of ‘in-learning’ by adults, or as (free) development of the child), or the way a song line comes to represent a community.7

This second level, I would claim, meets the conditions for the empty signifier but seems to be quite different from the examples Laclau gives of what might qualify as such. In those text where the notion has been presented (Laclau 2000; Laclau 2005) the empty signifier is presented as a specific demand that comes to represent ‘the absent fullness of the community’. However, the actual examples given, e.g. the figure of Perón, are not (obviously) ‘demands’. Perhaps a fruitful line of reasoning could be to make a distinction between a particular demand (or ‘object’ of intervention, such as learning), and the subject carrying out the demand. This would then be the third level of metaphorisation: when the subject of the intervention (the Peronist movement, the Orange movement etc.), ceases to be it self, a (relatively) well defined and separate position and starts to function as representation of change as such (towards an absent fullness).

7 This is what I have called an ‘organizing metaphor’, and it seems to be very close to Marten Hajer’s concept of ‘story line’.
Of course any praxis of (political) intervention involves a modification of the agent carrying it out. So when the Ministry of Education intervening in questions about learning in kindergartens is not the same, as the Ministry of Education that confined it self to schools and other institutions formally under its jurisdiction. However, taking part in the debate on the shaping of ‘learning’, does not make the Ministry of Education represent something more than it self, just like the other organisations remained themselves during the debate. It seems that we can distinguish between degrees of metaphorisation (or degrees of emptiness) depending on the extent to which the agent carrying out the task comes to represent a quest for change going beyond the content of the intervention it self. When the construction of a certain identity takes place within a largely sedimented framework, as in our previous case of Hylke, the particular demands – inclusive of the demand of the establishment of a community council – is not conceived as being antagonistic as such with the framework of their realization (most prominently the municipality in this case). Even though a metaphorical space of the identity of the community is necessarily constructed, the specific agents carrying out this task, mostly retains their ‘originally’ particular identity, separable from the demands as such. This is quite different from the situations, analysed by Laclau, of ‘populist ruptures’ where the particular identity of the populist movement tends to loose it ‘specific’ identity and to be representing ‘the people’ (meaning anti-oppression) as such. One needs just to think about the Orange revolution in Ukraine, where Orange was a metaphor for such a large set of different demands, that the specific agents carrying out the (successful) attempts for change, tended to loose their specificity and came (close) to occupy the place of ‘Ukrainess’ as such.

**Some analytical strategic problems in observing metaphors**

Let me conclude this paper by opening the discussion on some analytical strategic problems that follows from the ontological status granted metaphoricity (or rhetoricity) in discourse theory. Even though the distinction between the three levels of metaphorisation suggested above might help us in
concrete analysis, the distinction in itself cannot solve the more basic problems of the ‘visibility of metaphors’.

As Plotnitsky sums up Derrida’s argument concerning metaphor:

‘[G]eneral metaphoricity is irreducible and is irreducibly catachrestic, since, in principle, it entails an iterminable metaphoric play. This metaphoric or catachrestic play is in fact correlative to Derrida’s writing. ... Metaphor or (and as) writing in Derrida’s sense is irreducible even in an attempt to define (the concept or metaphor of) metaphor itself; for there can be no nonmetaphoric constituents out of which such a definition can be constructed’ (Plotnitsky 1994: 59).

So the first problem is that the literality that made a clear definition of metaphor possible has in it itself been put into question. Short of the theoretical problems this produces for the concept of metaphor (and these are not insignificant), this raises some problems for concrete analysis. If there can be no pure literal terms, how are we able to identify metaphors in the first place? Throughout this paper, I have (to some extent) simply avoided the question. But put under closer scrutiny, what I have called obvious metaphors are probably not so easily distinguished from those other terms at stake in debates.

The second problem is ‘the other side’ of the first one, namely that since we cannot have pure metaphoricity either – or actually empty signifiers – the discourse theory must develop more refined tools of identifying processes of emptying. The problem is that short of real emptiness, what we will see is a loosening of the link between a signifier and a particular signified. Again the theory must be developed in analytical strategic ways that allow the translation from the different forms such loosening can take, to the (degrees of) the emptying of the signifier.8

8 Here we meet the problem of the distinction between the empty and the floating signifier. It is also quite a serious
Discourse theory as developed by Laclau has correctly pointed out both the general metaphorical character of all signification (and ultimately all being). The theory also (rightly) stresses *politics* as a privileged field in revealing this ontological metaphoricity. But from these general ontological claims to the working out of analytical strategies for dealing with (different levels of) metaphors, there is still a lot of work to be done.
**Literature**


