# Metaphor and Empathy

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> The work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share.
>
> Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 581

Clearly, Jo Berry and Patrick Magee are extraordinary in their determination to engage in dialogue and their willingness to pursue shared understanding through very difficult moments and in the face of opposition from various sources. And clearly, each meeting and dialogue between people previously on opposing sides in conflict will be unique. What can be transferred from Jo and Pat's experience to other individuals is difficult to predict, but it is my belief that understanding in some detail how they talked to each other could offer something usefully transferable. That's why I was delighted when Jo offered to share videos of two of their conversations, along with a recording of a radio interview, and when both of them agreed to give permission for these to be used as data in a research project that began in 2004 (reported in Cameron, 2007)[i]. My goal was to find out, by analysing how they talked together, what could be useful to other people trying to reach understandings in similar, difficult circumstances. My 'way in' to such work is metaphor.

For many years now, I have been fascinated by how people use metaphor and what they do with metaphor in conversation. The metaphor analysis of the conversations led me to empathy, and, via another research project at the University of Leeds, empathy led to this new project that we are launching today. As well as showing you how Jo and Pat used metaphor, I will present some initial findings from looking at their conversations through the lens of empathy. I am hoping that this research can have an impact in the real world, in other reconciliation or conflict resolution situations and beyond that, in situations where language use contributes to the dynamics of empathy across groups in society

### *Metaphors in the talk*

We transcribed the videotapes of Jo and Pat's early conversations and their 2003 radio interview, and found all the metaphors that they used. The first slides will give you an idea of what metaphor looks like in talk.

**What metaphor in talk looks like - Jo and Pat's starting points**

*in*
a period of time is metaphorically referred to as a container by the use of the word *in*

*bring something positive out of it*
the metaphor here describes Jo's process in terms of some kind of JOURNEY in which she comes out of some place carrying something positive. The positive thing that she is carrying may be that empathy towards Pat.

*strongly*
using a physical word to describe feelings is metaphor.

*part of*
metaphor does not have to be strong, it can even, as here, Be a very conventional way of describing the world. This expression is counted as a metaphor because conflict does not have *parts*, we just see it that way.

You will see from these examples that **contemporary metaphor theory** takes us far beyond traditional view of metaphor as an ornament for poetry. Metaphor these days concerns itself also with the ordinary and the everyday, and seeks to understand how what people say reflects how they think -- we understand the world through metaphor, and so analysing the metaphors that people use can give us insight into their worlds. Using metaphor is no longer just seen as creating an exciting and strong figure of speech but also as using conventionalised ways of talking and thinking.

*Stories -- hearing, opening up, sharing*
This metaphor of ' hearing/listening to a story' indicates another side of the meetings. While *bringing something positive out of it* was Jo's personal goal, this action is more interpersonal or two way.

The metaphor became an important shared way of thinking about the process of "trying to imagine the world of the other". From my analysis it seemed that Jo brought this metaphor with her to their conversations. As

they talked together, Pat came to use it as well, and were many more uses when they met for the 4th time than when they met for the 2nd time. As a metaphor it offers flexibility -- it was used negatively by Jo to describe how the government had not paid sufficient attention to the Irish situation:

| 766 | what the government .. didn't do. |
| 767 | and, |
| 768 | .. the not <u>listening</u>, |
| 769 | not <u>hearing</u> [<u>their story</u>]. |

I find it very interesting because it lies somewhere between metaphor and not metaphor -- we have various technical terms to describe this phenomenon that I won't burden you with today, but the metaphor-like nature of these phrases seems to lie at the heart of what we do with language when we talk to each other and try to express what we think and feel. There is *listening* involved, but it's not a straightforward simple listening that is meant here; what is meant is more than listening -- empathic *hearing/listening* that includes trying to understand, paying attention, making an effort to imagine how things were for the Other.

Similarly, there may be *stories* involved (and there are actual stories told in the conversations), but there is some importance in describing your former enemy's version of the truth as a '*story*'. First of all, merely to acknowledge that the person you are talking with has a *story* is to acknowledge their humanity. It begins to reverse the process of dehumanisation that seems to characterise violent conflict. When social groups are in conflict, the individuals in the opposing group are spoken about in ways that turn them in to stereotypes, losing their individual humanity. When the group is seen as a mass, it is much easier to take action against them. In the post-conflict situation, allowing the former enemy to have a story and to tell it, is an important step that allows for the possibility of empathy.

Furthermore, allowing the other to 'tell their story' remains distinct from giving validity to that story as 'truth', and it is likely that participants in post-conflict conciliation need to retain this distinction – victims in particular may need to be able to listen and hear, and thereby understand better, without completely accepting the Other's justification for violence -- a view of the world that would indeed be "difficult to share". The distinction between story and truth allows people to accept that the other person believes what they are saying while not accepting necessarily the moral values underlying their actions.

*Opening* occurs very frequently, very often used by Pat to describe how he found Jo. For me, this was quite a puzzling metaphor -- I could see roughly what is meant by saying *a person is open* but it was difficult to link this metaphor to others; it seems to just occur in this form, *open*. As we'll see later, by linking this metaphor to those used with a completely opposite meaning, and by linking it to empathy, it comes to have a useful role.

When we compare the metaphors that Jo uses to describe her entry into the process of trying to understand Pat, with his metaphors, we see how the difference in metaphors reflects the difference in their motivations to meet. And this is our first example of how metaphors may reveal people's ideas, attitudes and values.

*Backdrop, platform, message*
Here we are not in a cosy world of sharing stories so much as in a more impersonal setting like this lecture theatre. Part of Pat's motivation was to explain the politics and history behind his decision, to represent the Republican viewpoint, so that he came to the meetings not just as an individual but as what we might call a 'collective self'.

*The way I walked into it*
Again, we include very conventionalised metaphors like *way* where a kind of JOURNEY or road metaphor is used to speak about a choice. And again, we have a metaphor-like phrase *walked into* -- Pat did literally walk into the meeting, but this phrase means more than that; it refers also to his attitudes and ideas about their meeting.

*Perspective* is one of many metaphors to do with UNDERSTANDING AS SEEING, this one capturing the idea that the position we stand in affects what we see, just as our attitudes and values affect what we understand.

*open*
When Pat reflects on how his motivations for talking with Jo changed, he uses the *open* metaphor -- and one of the things I examined was how Jo and Pat used each other's metaphors, or tried to change each other's metaphors.


## Metaphor analysis
Put very succinctly [ii], what we do with metaphor when using it as a tool for analysing talk is:

- find all metaphors
- group them together by their metaphorical meanings
- look for patterns of metaphor use
- interpret the link between metaphor patterns and people's ideas, attitudes and values.

As we have already seen, for example, we can see a difference in Pat and Jo's attitudes to meeting each other reflected in their different metaphors. Metaphor patterns can also reveal:

- difficult or critical moments in the talk, signalled by dense clusters of metaphors;
- how speakers think about key topics by using the same or similar metaphors over and over again to talk about them -- we call this 'framing' ideas;
- how speakers change their ideas through talking together, indicated by the movement and changing of metaphors.

The next slide shows how we group the metaphors together by their meanings in the metaphorical world -- all these metaphors are about JOURNEYS and they all refer to the process of understanding the Other. So we can bundle them together and give them a label such as UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER IS A LONG JOURNEY ON FOOT TOWARDS THE OTHER. I call these systematic metaphors. There may be hundreds of systematic metaphors emerging from an analysis of conversations, and more work is needed to find patterns (see note 2).

## Framing metaphors: connection/separation

Four metaphors stood out as being used to 'frame' ideas in the talk:

- *RECONCILIATION IS A JOURNEY*
- *RECONCILIATION IS LISTENING TO THE OTHER'S STORY*
- *UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER IS CONNECTION*
- *UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER IS SEEING MORE CLEARLY*

*UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER IS CONNECTION*

When Jo and Pat talk about trying to understand the world of each other, they use metaphors about *connecting* and *separating*, in particular three, more specific, systematic metaphors. Two of these are ways of making connections: *building bridges, breaking down barriers*. The third is a pre-condition to connection: being *open*.

The *building bridges* metaphor entered the talk as a theme of a poem that Jo wrote before meeting Pat and that she read aloud to him in both conversations. As a metaphor, *building bridges* emphasises the gap between self and Other as what is in need of bridging; understanding is metaphorised as the *bridge*, and empathising is the act of *building the bridge*. The metaphor starts as Jo's 'property' in the poem, but is gradually used also by Pat – four times in the first conversation and seven times in the second. Only Jo uses it in the interview. In one of his first uses in a response to the poem (Extract 15), Pat elaborates the metaphor of the *bridge* to emphasise their different starting points *coming to a bridge with 2 ends*. He makes a point by changing the metaphor slightly

This elaboration in line 685 of *two ends* enables Pat to distance himself slightly from Jo while at the same time maintaining alignment through repeating her bridge metaphor. It feels as if this short extract of talk captures in miniature the idea of empathy as trying to share an understanding of the other's world even when that difficult to do.

By the time of the second recorded conversation, Pat has adopted Jo's metaphor, extending it to talk about wider conciliation processes between other people caught up in violence:

     2: 573           all those <u>bridges</u> are there to be <u>built</u>

As often happens when people use metaphor in conversation, contrasting metaphors are used to reinforce points being made, and Pat includes 3 metaphors that contrast with *building bridges*: *distances, barriers, exclusions.* Each of these suggests separation and negative feelings about that separation, in contrast to the more positive building of bridges.

In this next slide, a collection of metaphors work together to build up a story or scenario where barriers are broken down, connection can be made and people can be close. *Breaking down barriers* is a more violent alternative to *building bridges*, and echoes violence and barriers of burning cars and army roadblocks seen on the streets of Northern Ireland.


### *Opening the possibility of empathy*

If we now go back to the idea of *openness*, we can see that it fits into the scenario in which people are listening to each other rather than putting up barriers to hearing and understanding them. Jo, also arguing through presenting contrasts in strong terms, uses metaphors of *shut down, locked out* and *closed*, all of them opposites to *open*, to describe the consequences of refusing empathy.

It seems that empathy cannot even begin to happen until channels between people are *opened*, and so I am building the necessity for *openness* in to my theoretical model of empathy, as a prerequisite. The re-humanisation the former enemy cannot begin without some opening of channels of communication between individuals.

There are likely to be various ways to facilitate the opening of channels: mediators might help the process; the physical place and the atmosphere matters -- Jo talks about the need for *safe spaces for people to talk*; it may help to have a formal, even governmental, set up that creates such spaces, and encourages and sets official expectations that empathy is appropriate.

Halpern and Weinstein (2004) recount how the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought together wives whose husbands had been killed with the policeman responsible for their deaths. When he told his story, the victims' relatives were moved by his apparent grief, and this emotional connection served to open the possibility for reconciliation. It did not make this reconciliation happen, but served to make it possible.

### *Connecting processes in empathy*

We have decided to use the term **connecting processes** to describe ways of talking and thinking that can happen once channels are opened and that build up to empathy.

One of the effects of dehumanising is to disconnect the Other from the Self; the Other becomes unworthy of consideration as a fellow human being. Individuals are reduced to stereotypes that represent polarised groupings. Collective identities may invoke violence towards the dehumanised grouping, reinforced by social pressures, including political or religious ideologies. In a post-conflict situation, there needs to be a return from stereotype to complex individual. *Listening to the other's story* is one way in which the other person can be understood as a full and complex human being. There are many other ways of connecting to the Other, and in the first two years of the project we aim to find out the various **connecting processes** that occur in different kinds of talking, and of course how metaphor contributes.

A review of the literature that I'm in the process of carrying out suggests that empathy has both an emotional and a cognitive component. The emotional component (feeling with) is faster and more automatic, while the cognitive component (understanding) takes longer, is more controlled

and more conscious. Emotionally, we can be affected by other people; a person with a sad face may make us feel sad, and it's well known that hearing people laugh, will make us laugh even if we don't know the joke. This emotional resonance happens more or less automatically, although it will not happen if the emotions of the other person are not attended to, as when individuals are de-humanised and not deemed worthy of notice. The understanding component -- sometimes called "perspective-taking" -- is a process that tries to imagine how it is to be the other person. Perspective-taking involves being curious about the Other, and also differentiating Self from Other (not imagining how <u>I</u> would feel in that situation but imagining how <u>they</u> would feel). Because empathy demands a degree of depth in understanding the Other, it is likely, in post-conflict situations, to bring with it negative feelings such as anger or hatred (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). To empathise with a former enemy may require people to tolerate emotional ambivalence, disagreeing with the Other's perspective while at the same time seeking to understand it.  We will see in Jo and Pat's conversations a slightly different take on this.(despair, gifts, former and current self alterity)


## Connecting processes and metaphors

Here are just a few of the connecting processes identified so far in Jo and Pat conversations:

 imagining the other's feelings
 acknowledging the other's feelings
 presenting feelings and experience directly
 justifying choices
 inviting stories and explanations
 offering stories and explanations
 offering to answer questions
 allowing the other to use your metaphors
 accepting responsibility

I now take some of these and show how metaphor functions to make them happen.


### Imagining the other's feelings
 364  I know it must have been <u>uncomfortable</u> for you to listen to.
 368  ...(1.0) that,
 369  ...(2.0) Brighton,
 370  ...(1.0) <u>from our perspective,</u>
 371  was a justified act.

397    ...(1.0) there's that <u>cruel</u> word.
398    .. you know,
399    um,
400    <u>cruel</u> expression.
401    .. he was a legitimate <u>target</u>.

When Pat explains to Jo about the bombing, he prefaces his words with a projection into how it feels for Jo, using the metaphor *uncomfortable,* and a short time later describes a word for expression as *cruel.* It seems to me that this second act of imagination goes a step further than the first -- Pat is imagining not just how he might feel in that situation, but how Jo could feel. This can be seen as an attempt to empathise with Jo, a contribution to developing empathy between them, and so is one of our connecting processes. We can note that the metaphor of *target* characterises the dehumanising language of violent conflict, reducing the perceived enemy to something less than human.

**Using the Other's labels**
Pat continues by using different words to describe Jo's father which illustrate another connecting process, using the other's labels, *father, grandfather.*

402    ...(2.0) meeting you though.
403    ...(1.0) I'm reminded of the fact that he was also a human being.
404    ...(1.0) and that he was your father.
405    ... and that he was your --
406    ...(1.0) your daughter's,
407    ... grandfather.
408    .. and that's .. all <u>lost</u>.
409    ...(1.0) so,
410    ...(1.0) <u>as far</u> that's --
411    ...(1.0) how --
412    how can you er express the poignancy of that.
413    you know er,
414    ...(1.0) <u>there's no way around it</u>.

We also see a metaphor being used as metaphors often are in line 408, to comment and evaluate. This phrase *that's all lost* is one that haunted me during the data analysis because of its simple force. Metaphor is not only evocative and rich in poetry but also in people's talk to each other.

The final line uses another JOURNEY metaphor to emphasise size, scale and importance; the death and his responsibility for it is an immoveable object that he must confront.

## Accepting responsibility

The same metaphorical scenario plays out in this extract where Pat accepts responsibility, also imagining Jo's feelings by using *pain*. Accepting responsibility means he has to somehow deal with the immovable object -- he can't *walk away from* it nor can he *hide*. The political situation that motivated the bombing is described as *the bigger picture*.

| 1-1420 | | bottom line is, |
|---|---|---|
| 1421 | | that is true. |
| 1422 | | .. I am the person who caused your pain. |
| 1423 | | .. even though it was a -- |
| 1424 | | ... it was the Irish Republican Army, |
| 1425 | | it was the Republican movement, |
| 1426 | | it was the Republican struggle. |
| 1427 | Jo | .. hmh |
| 1428 | Pat | that caused your pain. |
| 1429 | | but I can't walk away from the fact that it was -- |
| 1430 | | ...(1.0) I was directly, |
| 1431 | Jo | [hmh] |
| 1432 | Pat | [responsible] too for that. |
| 1433 | Jo | .. [[hmh]] |
| 1434 | Pat | [[I can't]] hide behind the -- |
| 1435 | | you know the -- |
| 1436 | | ... sort of, |
| 1437 | | the bigger picture. |

We can also noticed the ACCOUNTING metaphor *bottom line*, and the double relabelling that involves two metaphors *movement* and *struggle*. These metaphors contributed to the strong group identity of the IRA -- how they described themselves and the situation. Pat's use of them might be an indication of him speaking from a 'collective self' or group identity.

### Disarming metaphors

| 239 | the more I hear of your story, |
|---|---|
| 242 | the less, |
| 243 | ...(1.0) I am seeing you, |
| 244 | ...(1.0) as the perpetrator. |
| 245 | ...(1.0) and, |
| 246 | .. the more, |
| 247 | ... I am seeing you, |
| 249 | ...(1.0) someone who's -- |
| 250 | ...(3.0) had, |
| 251 | ... a lot of struggle, |
| 252 | ...(1.0) and a lot of reasons to do what you've done. |
| 253 | ...(2.0) and the more, |
| 254 | I am feeling, |

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255     ...(1.0) part of,
256     ... that struggle.
```

I was interested to find Jo using the metaphor of *struggle* (it's a metaphor that relates the physical to the emotional). When she describes Pat as *someone who's had a lot of struggle,* she is imagining his world and acknowledging what she has learnt about his history, both of which are connecting strategies. By using the word *struggle* she does something more -- she takes the word out of its IRA use, removes the definite article *the* (and the capital letter which represents its adoption by particular groups for that very specific use) and uses it in a less specific way. Having change the use of the word, she then, even more radically, describes herself as *feeling part of that struggle*. I have described this process of removing the force of the metaphor and the word as 'disarming metaphor', a term that seems to fit the context. It's an example of how we might pass on our findings to mediators in post-conflict reconciliation, encouraging them to notice collective metaphors and support ways of removing their power to reinforce group identity.

**Adopting the Other's metaphor**
A move of metaphor in the other direction, from Jo to Pat, seems to occur with the word *healing*.

```
1142   Pat    how do you put it,
1143          er,
1144          ...(2.0) maybe that's part of healing too,
1145          .. my healing.
1146   Jo     your healing.
1147          .. [yeah].
1148   Pat    [yeah].
1149          ...(1.0) you know,
1150          er,
1151          ...(2.0) it's --
1152          er,
1153          something I have to go through.
1154   Jo     ... hmh
1155   Pat    ... if I'm going to sort of --
1156          er,
1157          ...(1.0) <X really X> retain my humanity.
```

Just before this extract, Pat has said that he thinks he deserves to be confronted with Jo's pain, as a consequence of his decision to use violence (he *can't walk away from* it; he can't *hide* from it; and now he must *go through* it). He then goes on to use the word *healing* which has mostly been Jo's word and the idea so far -- she uses it to refer to recovering from grief. On the basis of the pauses and hesitations, the hmmhs and ers, and the short turns, I surmise that this was quite a

difficult piece of talk. Jo, however, appears to grant permission for Pat to use the *healing* word, and thereby be entitled to a healing process. In this appropriation of the metaphor, it comes to refer to a process of facing consequences and acknowledging suffering.

The connecting process here works in 2 directions: Pat adopts Jo's metaphor, and Jo allows this adoption.

## *Conclusion*

I hope you can see from these examples how metaphor analysis is going to help our understanding of empathy. There is a lot of work still to do in identifying the range of connecting processes in a way that will be useful. We have started to imagine that we might produce a 'toolkit' for mediators that includes techniques for opening up the possibility of empathy and for supporting connecting processes between people. As we continue the project work, our website will keep you informed about the progress. We look forward to welcoming you back in 3 years time to our end of project event when we will be able to share our outcomes with you.

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**Notes**

[i] Dr Juup Stelma was research assistant on the project "Using visual display to explore the dynamics of metaphor in conciliation talk", funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council).

[ii] For a full description of the method see Cameron et al., 2009, and a book to be published in 2010, Cameron and Maslen (eds) *Metaphor analysis: Research practice in applied linguistics, social sciences and humanities.* London: Equinox. There is also method information on the website: http://creet.open.ac.uk/projects/metaphor-analysis/index.cfm

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