

“Grab that gorgeous, beautiful star of ours”: A critical discourse analysis of Eugene Cernan’s interview

“Alcanza esa hermosa y brillante estrella nuestra”: Un análisis crítico del discurso de la entrevista con Eugene Cernan

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of an interview with Eugene Cernan, commander of Apollo 17 and the last astronaut to walk on the Moon. The work examines how metaphorical language reflects Cernan’s experiences, emotions, and ideologies as an astronaut. Drawing on theories of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2010), the analysis focuses on structural, ontological, and simile expressions found in the interview. The methodology consisted of selecting the interview, reading its transcript, identifying relevant metaphorical expressions, and interpreting their meaning within the context of space exploration. The findings show that Cernan uses metaphors to describe personal challenges, teamwork, spirituality, Earth, and humanity. Expressions such as “a taller mountain to climb,” “God’s front porch,” and “we’re all one” reveal ideas of perseverance, collective effort, spiritual reflection, and human unity. The analysis also suggests that Cernan’s discourse is shaped by military values, ambition, humility, and the emotional impact of the overview effect. Overall, this study demonstrates that metaphors are not only rhetorical devices but also cognitive tools that help communicate extraordinary experiences and construct meaning about Earth, humanity, and existence.

Keywords: Metaphor, Ideology, Discourse Analysis, Astronaut, Interview

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta un análisis crítico del discurso de una entrevista con Eugene Cernan, comandante del Apolo 17 y el último astronauta en caminar sobre la Luna. El análisis examina cómo el lenguaje metafórico refleja las experiencias, emociones e ideologías de Cernan como astronauta. Con base en las teorías de la metáfora propuestas por Lakoff y Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2010) el análisis se centra en expresiones estructurales, ontológicas y símiles encontrados en la entrevista. La metodología consistió en seleccionar la entrevista, leer su transcripción, identificar expresiones metafóricas relevantes e interpretar su significado dentro del contexto de la exploración espacial. Los hallazgos muestran que Cernan utiliza metáforas para describir desafíos personales, trabajo en equipo, espiritualidad, la Tierra y la humanidad. Expresiones como “una montaña más alta que escalar”, “el porche delantero de Dios” y “todos somos uno” revelan ideas de perseverancia, esfuerzo colectivo, reflexión espiritual y unidad humana. El análisis también sugiere que el

discurso de Cernan está influido por valores militares, ambición, humildad y el impacto emocional del efecto perspectiva. En general, este estudio demuestra que las metáforas no son solo recursos retóricos, sino también herramientas cognitivas que ayudan a comunicar experiencias extraordinarias y a construir significado sobre la Tierra, la humanidad y la existencia.

Palabras clave: Metáfora, Ideología, Análisis del Discurso, Astronauta, Entrevista

Introduction

Language is an essential part of discourse analysis because it helps understanding human communication and the ways in which people express their experiences. One of the most common linguistic resources used in discourse analysis are metaphors. Metaphors are significant because they allow speakers to communicate complex or abstract ideas through more concrete and familiar comparisons. Metaphors play an important role in shaping meaning and interpretation within discourse (Young, 2013). Moreover, metaphors are not just decorative elements of language, but they function as tools through which people understand and interpret reality.

The use of metaphors is particularly relevant in the context of space exploration. In astronauts' speech, metaphors help to explain how astronauts experience sensations and environments that are difficult to describe through just literal language. That is why metaphors function as communicative tools that allow these experiences to be compared with familiar human experiences (Billings, 2006).

This paper analyzes an interview with Eugene Cernan, the commander of the Apollo 17 mission and the last astronaut to walk on the Moon in 1972. His unique experience provides an opportunity to examine and reflect on how language is used to describe life beyond Earth. His discourse communicates positive emotions, perspectives and values that help us understand space exploration as a human experience.

This report is structured into five sections. First, the literature review presents the concept of metaphor and relevant theoretical perspectives. Second, the methodology section describes the steps followed to conduct the analysis. Third, the findings and discussion section explains the types of metaphors identified and their interpretation. Finally, the conclusions summarize the main findings and discuss the implications of the use of metaphors in the context of space exploration.

Literature review

Traditionally, metaphors have been understood as rhetorical language mainly used in literature and poetry to create comparisons with literal language. However, in linguistics and discourse analysis, metaphors are part of everyday communication. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not simply decorative expressions, but conceptual tools that shape the way people understand reality and express experiences. Knowles and Moon (2004) similarly define metaphors as the language used to refer to something other than what it was originally connected to, or what it literally means, to suggest similarities or create a connection between two things.



Another element of rhetorical language is the simile, which is defined as a comparison between two different things using the words 'like' or 'as' (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). For example, "*red like a rose*". Although similes and metaphors may look similar, there is distinction between them. Metaphors present comparisons that are not literally true, while similes establish comparisons that are literally possible (Knowles & Moon, 2004).

Moreover, metaphor theory proposes different classifications and variations of metaphors. However, for the purposes of this paper, only three types of metaphors will be discussed. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and also Kövecses (2010), conceptual metaphors can be classified into three main categories: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors.

Structural metaphors are used to explain one concept through another more familiar concept. These types of metaphors help individuals understand abstract ideas and experiences more easily. For instance, in the metaphor "time is money," time is presented as something valuable that can be spent, saved, or wasted. Although time is not a physical object, this metaphor allows people to think about time in the same way they think about money.

Oriental metaphors serve the function of organizing concepts through human spatial orientation, such as up/down, inside/outside, or center/periphery. These metaphors are more used to connect emotions with physical experiences. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), these metaphors are based on the fact that human beings have bodies that function within a physical environment. For example, expressions such as "feeling down" or "high spirits" connect emotional states with vertical orientation, associating positive feelings with "up" and negative feelings with "down".

Ontological metaphors permit individuals to understand abstract experiences through more concrete ideas by using physical objects as references. For example, the expression "my mind is full of ideas" indicates that the mind is container that can be filled. This helps people visualize thoughts and emotions as physical objects or spaces. This process of transforming abstract concepts into entities or objects helps researchers identify how speakers construct meaning through language (Kövecses, 2010).

In addition, previous studies have analyzed the role of metaphors in different types of discourse. One of these fields is space exploration, where metaphors are used to help us see how society understands astronauts, missions and outer space. Billings (2006) explains that expressions related to "frontiers," "exploration," and "discovery" are used to describe space travel by relating it to familiar human experiences and perceptions of the world.

Furthermore, studies have also examined how space travel influences astronauts' perspectives and experiences. Yaden et al. (2016) describe the "Overview Effect" as a feeling of awe and transcendence experienced by astronauts when they view Earth from space. This experience can produce emotional and psychological changes that affect astronauts' perceptions of humanity and human connection. Similarly, White (2020) shows that experiences in outer space can influence astronauts' spiritual beliefs and understanding of life on Earth. Because these experiences are unusual and difficult to describe, literal language may not be enough to transmit. In this sense, Young (2013) argues that metaphors are not only rhetorical expressions, but also cognitive tools that help individuals interpret reality and construct meaning.



These studies suggest that metaphors play an important role in helping astronauts communicate experiences that may otherwise be difficult to explain through literal language. Therefore, analyzing the metaphors used by Eugene Cernan can provide insight into how he understood and expressed his experience as an astronaut.

Methodology

This study presents a discourse analysis addressing the following research question: How do the metaphors used in the interview with Eugene Cernan reflect his experience and ideologies as an astronaut in the Apollo 17 mission?

The text selected for this analysis was an interview with Eugene Cernan, the commander of the Apollo 17 mission Moon landing and the last astronaut to walk on the Moon until now. The interview was conducted by Cyndi Lavrencic for Ten News Perth in 2016¹. The interview was selected because it provides insights into the perspective and ideology of a human being who experienced an extraordinary reality through space exploration. The analysis focuses on the description of Cernan's experiences and ideologies through metaphorical language on the Moon and in space.

Once the interview was selected, the transcript was read to identify the most relevant parts for the analysis. After identifying the metaphors, the samples were selected and organized according to their meaning and function within the discourse. Finally, the metaphors were analyzed to examine how they shaped Eugene Cernan's perspective and reveal ideologies related to human experience, space exploration, and the perception of Earth from space.

Findings and discussion

In this section, the metaphors and similes found in Eugene Cernan's interview are presented. Throughout his discourse, his perception of Earth and traveling to space can be reflected and analyzed in terms of ideological meaning-making.

In the interview, Eugene Cernan first talks about his experiences as an astronaut and the challenges he faced during the Apollo missions. Then, he reflects on his experiences on the Moon and describes the emotional impact of seeing Earth from space. At the end of the interview, he discusses humanity and how space exploration changed his perspective about the world and life on Earth. Below I present the key metaphors identified in the interview and the corresponding interpretation in terms of discursive meaning.

¹ Video taken from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmZW526-pA4&t=225s>



"It's like a story book"

This expression can be classified as a simile. Cernan uses it after explaining how he was selected for the Apollo program out of around 120 participants and reflects on how he never imagined accomplishing all the things he later did. By comparing his experience to a storybook, he presents his career as something almost unreal and extraordinary. The metaphor also evokes a common reference from childhood: reading fantastic stories at night or in school that often result in childrens' dreams of becoming an astronaut or explorer.

"A taller mountain to climb"

This is a structural metaphor that appears when Cernan reflects on the challenges he faced before he was selected for the Apollo program. He mentions not feeling that he was good enough for the program. Describing his goals as a "mountain to climb" helped him to present success as a difficult physical challenge or a process that is usually marked by multiple obstacles that are unexpected and not linear.

"Share God's front porch with you"

This structural metaphor is said by Cernan when he reflects on the spiritual impact of seeing Earth from the Moon. When he tries to explain the meaning of the experience inviting people to imagine that they "sat on God's front porch" looking back at Earth as "a small part of his creation." Through this metaphor, Cernan exemplifies space as a place closely connected to creation and the divine. This suggests that seeing Earth from space changed the way he understood humanity, existence, and the universe itself (the overview effect). The reference to God can also be taken to represent Cernan's spiritual beliefs and position him as a religious man, which contrasts with the imaginary of scientists as atheist or non-religious figures.

"We were all pulling a wagon in the same direction"

This structural metaphor is mentioned when Cernan talks about teamwork among astronauts during the Apollo missions. When comparing their work to people pulling a wagon together, he indicates the missions as a collective effort that shows cooperation. This is an interesting metaphor that is anchored on the idea of how a machine, or a 'ship' works on earth, in using this metaphor he evokes the idea of human-machine interaction at the time that he highlights the importance of human-human collaboration to achieve a common purpose.

"Grab that gorgeous, beautiful star of ours"

This structural metaphor seems to be one of the deepest and most meaningful expressions in the interview because of the desire Cernan wants to express. Seeing Earth from space gave him the feeling of wanting to "grab" Earth and bring it back home to make people understand the experience of observing the planet from space. This is other idea is connected to the "Overview Effect" (Yaden et al. 2016) and that sense of



astonishment towards the experience he had. Throughout this part of the interview, Cernan describes Earth with admiration, transmitting that seeing the planet from space changed the way he understood humanity, life and existence.

"We're all one"

This ontological metaphorical expression appears when Cernan reflects on how seeing Earth from space changed his perspective about humanity. When saying "we're all one", he presents humanity as a single united entity that goes beyond differences such as nationality, religion, or culture. The significance of the metaphor lies in the fact that having an outsider's perspective of the planet seems to blur or wipe away the labels that the mission and the crew carried with them to space. It is worth mentioning here that these scientific accomplishments and missions are deeply marked by a sense of competition among countries and space agencies.

In analyzing the interview in terms of ideologies, it was possible to identify some very interesting phrases that provide evidence of Cernan's beliefs regarding his identity at different levels. Cernan's discourse reflects ideas of perseverance, ambition, and achievement since he was young. For example, he expressed beliefs connected to his childhood desires when he explains that "becoming a naval aviator" was his dream. In addition, his discourse reflects military ideologies influenced by his identity as an American man and his strong sense of belonging and duty toward his country, specifically in references like "the best of the best that my country could put together" and his constant mention of the Navy and military aviation. The humility and sense of merit he demonstrates can be observed when he constantly says that he was "not good enough" and that he "had a long way to go" before becoming part of NASA. Finally, although he does not mention a specific religion, his repeated references to "God's front porch," "a creator of this universe," and spirituality suggest a strong spiritual belief that seems to become reinforced after his experience of seeing Earth from space. Put together, this narrative reflects the connection among patriotism, national identity and spirituality, which can be interpreted through the concept of American Civil Religion (Bellah, 1967). According to Bellah, this concept describes the integration of belief in God with national purpose, public service, sacrifice, and the shared civic values that model American political culture.

Conclusions

Through this analysis, it was possible to identify structural, ontological, and simile expressions related to challenges, spirituality, teamwork, and the *overview effect*. These metaphors show emotional and spiritual perspectives influenced by Cernan's experiences in space. The study also demonstrated how metaphorical language helped him communicate experiences that may be difficult to describe through literal language, especially when he demonstrates the emotional impact of seeing Earth from space. In addition, the findings demonstrated that Cernan's ideologies are connected to perseverance, military values, self-merit, exploration, and spirituality. His references to human unity, achievement, and the divine suggest that space exploration influenced not only his perception of Earth, but also his understanding of humanity and existence.



Overall, this study demonstrates that metaphors function not only as rhetorical language resources, but also as helpful tools when individuals want to express emotions, construct meaning, communicate perspectives. His discourse also allowed a deeper appreciation of the emotional beauty and reflection behind his experience as an astronaut and the way he understood Earth, humanity, and existence after traveling to space.

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