

## The Risk of Ambiguity in Metaphors

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *The use of metaphors is a valuable technique in therapy, as they do entail an element of ambiguity. On the other hand, it is precisely the possibility of ambiguity in interpretation that may entail an element of risk.*

**Objectives:** *The purpose is to explore other settings where metaphors have been used precisely because they do entail an element of ambiguity.*

**Methods:** *Qualitative analysis and literature review.*

**Results:** *The possibility of ambiguity in interpretation has made metaphors the favorite tool of language artists throughout the ages. Sometimes the transformative power of metaphor opens the way to the solution of a client's problem, a lasting development called "change", while in other cases the cause of misunderstanding lies in the specter of perception.*

**Conclusions:** *The literature review provides evidence for the use of ambiguity in Delphic oracles and the necessity for further exploration of the ambiguity interpretation factors that might influence the conditions to an ecologic outcome.*

**Keywords:** *perception, interpretation, semantics, ecology context, neurolinguistics, NLP*



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## **I. Introduction**

Clients consult therapists for help in solving problems. A metaphor enables the client to associate an issue with a real-life situation. Such understanding may help break a deadlock and lead to finding the solution of the problem. The use of metaphors may be a valuable technique in therapy, but it entails an element of risk, because of the ambiguity involved in their interpretation.

A metaphor is defined as a word or phrase for one thing that is used to refer to another thing, in order to show or suggest that they are similar. Therapists have found that sometimes the transformative power of metaphor opens the way to a solution of a client's problem, leading to a lasting development called "change." On the other hand, it is precisely the possibility of ambiguity in interpretation that has made metaphors a favorite tool of large and small con artists through the ages.

### **Is there a risk in using metaphors?**

Communication, or rather miscommunication, is widely acknowledged as the cause of many problems, both in organizational and personal settings. And often the cause of miscommunication is the specter of perception. People are prisoners of perception, irrespective whether they are professionals, customers or individuals, in personal or family settings. Needless to say, therapy clients are no exception.

Therapists are obviously guided by the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) presupposition "The meaning of a communication is the response you get". However, as Friedrich Nietzsche, a great-great grandfather of NLP, put it, "All things are subject to interpretation". Thus, despite a therapist's conscientious effort, a client cannot but interpret a metaphor according to his or her own "map of the world" and in NLP we, of all people, know well that "the map is not the territory".

Despite their proven remarkable achievements, the ancient Greeks could not help but also be thirsty for what lay in store for them. And they resorted to an array of oracle sites, seers, prophets and prophetesses to find out. Interestingly, since primeval times, women played a greater role than men as future predictors, probably because men were awed by the miracle of child-bearing.

Most of the numerous Greek oracles were dedicated to Zeus, the Father of the Gods. Among them stood out the oracle of Dodona, perhaps the oldest purely Hellenic one in origin, the oracle at the Siwa

Oasis in Libya, which was incidentally consulted personally by Alexander the Great and, of course, the grandfather of them all: the world's famous oracle at Delphi, dedicated to Apollo as described by Broad (2006). Delphi is as famous today as it was in ancient times. Nowadays, numerous visitors of many nationalities go to the exciting archaeological site of Delphi and even the term "Delphi" is used in various formats in electronics.

## **II. Method: a qualitative analysis of ancient Greek philosophical metaphors**

It is less known, however, that the name "Delphi" is relatively, recent. Well before the Greek tribes left the steppes seeking for a better life – chasing the sun, until one day they reached a water that was bluer than any other, the Aegean Sea – the indigenous inhabitants of the region, called Pelasgians, already had a full-fledged oracle operating at a hamlet, called Pytho in their language, located at the site of later Delphi. Its wise guardian spirit was a giant snake, aptly called Python, reputed to be the son of the goddess Gaia who was venerated in the oracle's temple.

The migrating Greeks wasted no time taking over the lucrative oracle that charged substantial fees for its services. Abandoning the non-Greek name Pytho, they renamed the village Delphi (from the Greek word "delphys", meaning "womb"), probably in reference to the goddess Gaia, known as Mother Earth. They created the myth of Apollo, an Indo-European deity who slew the guard-serpent Python, a native deity, and rededicated the oracle to Apollo.

The myth symbolized the conquest of the indigenous Mediterranean inhabitants by Indo-European Greek tribes. And yet, Python's importance as a symbol of wisdom remained. Every woman who served as priestess-medium in Delphi was referred to as Pythia, meaning Pythoness, and even kept live snakes in her quarters.

One would reasonably ask how in a male dominated society such as ancient Greece women could retain an important position such as that of Pythia. Again, the mystery of motherhood obviously made matriarchy the prevailing social system in pre-Hellenic times. And the archaic belief in the power of a mother-goddess was so deeply rooted that when the Indo-European Greeks imposed a patriarchal system, some matriarchal vestiges remained. As examples stand not only the important Delphic Pythonesses, but also the fact that the priestess of the Earth goddess, Demeter,

was the only married woman allowed to watch the Olympic Games, as well as few other matriarchal traces left in Greek society.

The Delphic Oracle was respected throughout the Greek world and even in neighboring countries, as mentioned by Vandenberg (2007). Both rich individuals and states consulted the oracle when facing dilemmas or before major undertakings or changes. Petitioners approached Apollo's temple bringing a sacrificial animal and, of course, a monetary donation.

Modern marketers would be interested in the procedure: petitioners drew lots to determine the order of admission, but the order was cut across by a more important factor. The higher fee you offered the oracle, the higher spot you were given in the long waiting line. Thus, representatives of city-states, with their huge donations, and rich individuals were granted priority. How would the priests running the operation be able to provide believable statements? They claimed that the temple's patron god, Apollo, spoke through the priestess Pythia. She sat on a tripod seat over a crack in the ground from which natural vapors emerged. She inhaled the vapors and when she entered an ecstatic trance state she started babbling. Her incoherent babblings were interpreted and explained to petitioners by, whom else, temple priests.

So how did the oracle at Delphi manage to acquire a sterling reputation for prophetic accuracy? No doubt, the interpreting priests of the oracle deserve to be admired for their brilliant use of ambiguity that made Delphi to be known as Navel of the Earth.

### **III. Discussions: examples of factors to consider for the use of metaphors in therapy**

Below are a few examples of such brilliant, but nevertheless stealthy, use of ambiguity.

A very famous suggestion concerned the very survival of the city of Athens. In 480 BC, when Xerxes, the son of Darius the Great of Persia, invaded Greece with a huge army primarily to avenge the Athenians for supporting their fellow Ionians in their revolt against Persia, the Athenians naturally consulted Delphi. The oracle advised them that "a wooden wall should be impregnable" as mentioned by Herodotus (edition: 1988).

A plain wooden wall? Has the oracle gone crazy? Well, the oracle was so highly respected that a number of Athenians erected a wooden wall around the Acropolis and fortified the site behind it. The invading Persians broke through the wall, slew all the defenders, plundered the temple and set fire to every part of the

citadel. Did the world-famous oracle make a mistake? No, certainly not. The priests were too smart to be caught unaware. The wise Athenian politician and general Themistocles saved Athens as well as the oracle's reputation. He perceived and interpreted the metaphor differently: to mean not a flimsy wall of wood, but an impregnable array of wooden warships, one that indeed stopped the Persians dead in their tracks in the monumental sea-battle of Salamis and thus saved not only Greece, but also Western Civilization, from Persian domination.

Another famous example of brilliant ambiguity occurred in 560 BC. Croesus, king of Lydia in Asia Minor, who had expanded his kingdom into an empire, asked the oracle if he should continue his territorial expansion by starting war against the Persians. The oracle responded, as described by Herodotus (edition: 1988), that if he started war against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire. Croesus assumed that the famous oracle was referring to the admittedly mighty Persian Empire and, feeling sure that he could defeat the Persians, he attacked Persia. The result: Croesus lost the war, lost his own empire and was taken prisoner by the Persians. Again, the priests did not make an error. Croesus did destroy a great empire; not the Persian, but his own.

Indeed, the oracle covered its bases all the time. In 403 BC, during the Peloponnesian War, Lysander, the admiral who led Sparta to victory against Athens, was at the height of his glory. Athens had just been crushed and Lysander asked the oracle what the future held for him. The oracle replied: "I warn you to be on your guard against a roaring warrior and the treacherous earthborn serpent having come from behind", as mentioned by Plutarch (edition: 1916). Even pious believers thought it was quite a stretch. A snake threatening the most powerful man in the Greek world at the time! Surely the oracle blew it. And yet, the crafty priests had several aces up their sleeves thanks to the ambiguity in using metaphors. Lysander was killed in battle eight years later, when he led a Spartan army reinforced by allies against a Boeotian alliance led by Thebes, a former staunch ally of Sparta, that sought hegemony after the Peloponnesian War. As described by the biographer Plutarch (edition: 1916), the Boeotian fighter, called Neochoros, who killed Lysander in an ambush, bore on his shield the image of a snake. Besides, could a treacherous former ally be called anything but a dirty snake?

Let us reflect on the importance of metaphors in solving clients' problems. While using metaphors

entails the risk of ambiguity, if therapists are especially careful in choosing and in presenting metaphors, these may lead to a magic moment of understanding, acceptance and the critically needed lasting change in a client's disposition.

Ecology check is a well-known and used term and principle in NLP. "Behaviors and change are to be evaluated in terms of context". It can provide, well ahead in the diagnostics phase, for factors that might induce side effects to the person or the wider system that the person belongs to. A well-structured metaphor could incorporate such factors to preclude chances of misinterpretations to the detriment of the overall therapeutic outcome.

When working with a person's timeline narrative, it is important for therapists to observe and listen to the language structure the person uses while trying to resourcefully meta-frame the issue at hand. Structures that presuppose cause and effect, complex equivalence, modal operators of necessity, and manifest that the person is still at the Effect side of the equation, require special attention and skillfulness by the therapist to facilitate the process of letting them turn to the Cause side for their narrative.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

As for the priests of the Delphi oracle, they remained artful to the very end. The Roman Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus is better known as Julian the

Apostate for his repudiation of Christianity and his determination not only to revive paganism, but even raise it to the level of an official religion of the Empire. It is said that, in 361, he sent an emissary to the oracle, which had declined with the rise of Christianity, to ask how he could help restore it to its former glory. But the priests did know that the show was over, because it was over. They replied with, what else, a metaphor: "Tell the king that the elaborate hall has crumbled to the ground. Apollo no longer has a hut, no divining laurel, no babbling spring. Even the babbling water has run dry".

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