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BOOK REVIEWS

James Geary, I Is an Other: *The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*

Susan Bay, reviewer

Book Review

I Is an Other

The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World

James Geary, HarperCollins 2011, 297 pages.

Susan Bay*

Almost 35 years ago, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published the seminal book on conceptual metaphor, *Metaphors We Live By*,[1] arguing that we indeed live according to metaphorical thought. Metaphor permeates every aspect of our being, and it "determine[s] questions of war and peace, economic policy, and legal decisions, as well as the mundane choices of everyday life."[2] To prove their point, Lakoff and Johnson describe categories of metaphors that most influence our ways of thinking (e.g., orientational metaphors,[3] ontological metaphors,[4] and personification[5]); they provide many examples of such metaphors and how they are fundamental to our lives; and they include much technical cognitive science and linguistic-based explanation of how and why metaphor works this way.[6]

In *I Is an Other*, James Geary makes Lakoff and Johnson's point again, providing additional examples of how metaphor permeates every aspect of modern human (and sometimes nonhuman) life. In doing so, Geary does

* Associate Professor of Legal Writing, Marquette University Law School.

1 George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

2 *Id.* at 243.

3 *Id.* at ch. 4.

4 *Id.* at ch. 6.

5 *Id.* at ch. 7.

6 If you're at all interested in metaphor, or at all doubtful that it is relevant to legal writing or other aspects of your life, you should read Lakoff and Johnson's book.

not delve as deeply into the esoterics of linguistics or cognitive science as Lakoff and Johnson do. But he does provide a broader foundation for the theory that we live by metaphor by showing that metaphor "is at work in all fields of human endeavor, from economics and advertising, to politics and business, to science and psychology."[7] In fact, "there is no aspect of our experience not molded in some way by metaphor's almost imperceptible touch."[8] Indeed, according to Geary, "[w]e utter about one metaphor for every ten to twenty-five words, or about six metaphors a minute."[9]

But we do not merely speak and write with metaphors; we understand and create with them. To demonstrate this, Geary cites not only Lakoff and Johnson, but also classical and contemporary scholars in rhetoric, literary criticism, archaeology, physics, economics, marketing, communication, mathematics, neuroscience, psychiatry, and more. He does this without overwhelming the reader by organizing his book into 16 chapters (including a foreword and an afterword, with the clever title, *Backword*[10]). Each of the chapters focuses on metaphor's relationship to various disciplines or aspects of our lives. Many of the categories obviously overlap (e.g., *Metaphor and Thought*,[11] *Metaphor and the Mind*,[12] *Metaphor and the Brain*[13]). And even the seemingly more disparate categories (*Metaphor and Advertising*,[14] *Metaphor and Children*,[15] *Metaphor and Science*[16]) often touch on the same fundamental concepts: that metaphor is prevalent in all that we do and are; that metaphor plays an essential role in both understanding and creating; that certain aspects of metaphor, like pattern recognition and personification, are central to human nature; that certain metaphorical references, like containers, journeys, transformations, and orientations, are so basic to the way we conceive of the world that we don't readily appreciate them as metaphors; and that context is key to understanding metaphors.

And Geary makes all of this fun to learn about by weaving in stories. Each chapter has a clever and enticing subtitle (e.g., *All Shook Up*,[17] *How High Can a Dead Cat Bounce?*,[18] *Experience Is a Comb That Nature Gives to Bald Men*,[19] and *The Earth is Like a Rice Pudding*[20]), and each tells at

7 James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World* 3 (2011).

8 *Id.*

9 *Id.* at 5.

10 *Id.* at 223–26.

11 *Id.* at 5–16.

12 *Id.* at 44–57.

13 *Id.* at 76–93.

14 *Id.* at 58–75.

15 *Id.* at 152–66.

16 *Id.* at 167–78.

17 *Id.* at 5–16.

18 *Id.* at 29–43.

19 *Id.* at 137–51.

20 *Id.* at 167–78.

least one relevant and detailed story about someone's experience with metaphor. Sometimes, the hero of the story is Geary himself, as he reveals personal details about his experiences with his children, wife, and mother that are as endearing as they are informative.

Of course, it's been well established that metaphor is relevant to law in so many ways. Law treatises, textbooks, and articles have discussed metaphor again and again.[21] So, the relevance of *I Is an Other* to those who seek to understand and create legal meaning is clear. But for those who aren't as turned on by metaphor as I would guess most readers of this journal are, Geary's book makes a few explicit and interesting references to the law.

Geary's first such reference arises in his discussion of "priming." Priming happens when, "through a process of metaphorical association, . . . [s]ensations, objects, and experiences" influence our attitudes and behavior.[22] Geary discusses how priming influences purportedly objective, unbiased, and independent judgments. He describes how, in a controlled experiment, German trial judges imposed longer sentences when the prosecutor demanded a longer sentence.[23] "Judges even gave significantly longer sentences when they were told that the person demanding the longer sentence was not a prosecutor but a first-semester computer science student."[24]

Geary then expands on priming's metaphorical effect when he describes an experiment that demonstrated "the influence of metaphorical associations on some of our most fundamental judgments."[25] After establishing that we live by the metaphor "that bright objects are good and dark objects are bad,"[26] Geary describes research linking these attitudes to discrimination: One researcher found that "in cases involving a black defendant and a white murder victim, . . . [d]arker-skinned African American defendants are more than twice as likely to get the death penalty than lighter-skinned African American defendants for equivalent crimes involving white victims."[27]

Geary concludes that "metaphor is the unacknowledged legislator of the world, since it so pervasively primes so many of our opinions, attitudes, and beliefs."[28] And this is especially troubling because, "[as]

21 Law review articles began citing to Lakoff and Johnson's seminal *Metaphors We Live By* only a year after it was published, Milner S. Ball, *Don't Die Don Quixote: A Response and Alternative to Tushnet, Bobbitt, and the Revised Texas Version of Constitutional Law*, 59 Tex. L. Rev. 787 (1981), and continue doing so today. *See e.g.* Stefan Larsson, *Karl Renner and (Intellectual) Property—How Cognitive Theory Can Enrich A Sociolegal Analysis of Contemporary Copyright*, 48 Law & Soc'y Rev. 3 (2014).

22 Geary, *supra* n. 7, at 96, 113–14.

23 *Id.* at 114.

24 *Id.*

25 *Id.* at 130.

26 *Id.* at 132.

27 *Id.*

28 *Id.* at 114.

Lakoff and Johnson observed, 'The people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true.'"[29] Lakoff and Johnson expound, "Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power—political leaders, religious leaders, business leaders, advertisers, the media, etc."[30] Therefore, those of us who share that power by reading, analyzing, discussing, and writing the law must act consciously to create metaphors that define the truth we want to live by.

Another, very different, explicit reference to how metaphor implicates the law comes in the chapter on *Metaphor and Parables and Proverbs*. Parables, Geary explains, are "narrated metaphors; they place a fictional story by the side of a fact of life."[31] Geary spends some time demonstrating what readers of this journal know—stories teach. "Many of the brain areas active while reading are also active when we actually take part in or observe similar situations in real life. . . . Just as we understand metaphors by mentally simulating what they describe, we understand stories by imaginatively acting them out in our minds."[32] Because "[p]arables are the most compressed and concentrated form of story[,] [t]hey are compact metaphorical thought experiments that help us solve essential psychological and social problems in the real world."[33]

"[P]roverbs are parables in miniature[,] . . . one-sentence stories, . . . [and] the oldest written examples of metaphor."[34] In some African ethnic groups, "[p]roverbs feature prominently in court cases, with both the prosecution and the defense enlisting them to bolster their arguments. Judges will often cite a proverb at the end of a case much as Western judges cite legal precedents."[35] And Abraham Lincoln used parables in much the same way to bolster his arguments.[36] Geary argues that "[t]he plain language of parable and proverb makes these metaphorical forms so potent."[37] "It also enables them to deliver powerful, provocative messages with unparalleled zest."[38]

Geary's book is also relevant to legal writers in other, less explicit, ways. For example, in the chapter on *Metaphor and Advertising*, he describes a game called "Smoke" that was regularly played by members of the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the 1950s "to demonstrate how figurative language adds depth to characterization in fiction."[39] "In Smoke, one

29 *Id.* at 116 (quoting Lakoff & Johnson, *supra* n. 1, at 160).

30 Lakoff & Johnson, *supra* n. 1, at 159–60.

31 Geary, *supra* n. 7, at 181.

32 *Id.* at 182.

33 *Id.*

34 *Id.* at 184–85.

35 *Id.* at 186.

36 *Id.* at 192.

37 *Id.* at 192–93.

38 *Id.* at 193.

39 *Id.* at 59.

player thinks of a person with whom the other players are familiar and provides a general clue about that person's identity, such as 'I am a living American' . . . . The other players then try to guess who that person is by asking offbeat, evocative questions like 'What kind of smoke are you?' . . . The player answers these questions as if the person really is a specific kind of smoke . . . ."[40] Geary provides the example of Marlon Brando as smoke "from a fire in an empty oil drum on a desolate, rain-soaked dock . . . ."[41] I look forward to playing this game myself and with my students when developing case themes and building characters for persuasive statements of facts.

Metaphor's relevance to legal writing extends beyond storytelling. It also provides much insight into the whys and hows of analogical reasoning. Geary's discussion of analogical reasoning begins by establishing that humans have an innate ability to detect patterns, and that pattern recognition is fundamental to metaphorical thinking.[42] Patterns influence behavior much as priming does. When we experience a pattern for long enough, our brains come to look for it. We begin "comparing situations to decide whether a new object or environment [is] sufficiently *like* a previous object or environment" to continue the pattern.[43] This "is the most primitive form of analogical reasoning, part of the neural circuitry for metaphor."[44]

In his chapter on *Metaphor and Children*, Geary develops this idea. He demonstrates that "the way a [case] is framed—which [facts] are offered, which words are chosen to describe those [facts], and which associated [comparisons] those alternatives evoke—has a powerful effect on" the result.[45] The examples Geary gives are based on experiments conducted by a psychologist to show how "frame flipping" influences our perception of similarities.[46] Adults were presented "with a set of four objects—paintings, billboards, pimples, and warts—and asked . . . to pair off those that were most similar."[47] Paintings were paired with billboards and pimples with warts. Then, the frame was shifted: "statues" was substituted for "pimples." With the "new set—paintings, billboards, statues, and warts—most people grouped paintings with statues and billboards with warts. Paintings and statues are both forms of visual art, while warts and billboards are both blemishes . . . ."[48] Geary concludes, "The same pair of objects can be viewed as similar or different depending on the

40 *Id.* at 58.
41 *Id.* at 59.
42 *Id.* at 32.
43 *Id.* at 34.
44 *Id.* at 35.
45 *Id.* at 163.
46 *Id.* at 164.
47 *Id.*
48 *Id.*

choice of a frame of reference."[49] Of course, legal rhetoricians can create similarities in much the same way by strategically framing the facts of cases to illustrate how the law has been applied in precedent.[50]

Many chapters in *I Is an Other* end with a plea that we study metaphor so that we can better understand it and control its effect on our world. We can't banish metaphors, so we must do our best to keep them "in the open and under the control of reasoning."[51] "[R]ecognizing the deep metaphors in [our] messages enables us to insert a moment of conscious choice into our . . . decisions."[52] And we must "carefully and consciously choose the metaphors we . . . use—and . . . be vigilant about those used by others" because "[m]etaphorical choices don't just reflect opinions and actions; they help shape them."[53] Each of these admonitions has special significance for legal writers, whose work has the potential to influence one or many, in small and significant ways.

49 *Id*. (quoting Amos Tversky, *Preference, Belief, and Similarity: Selected Writings* (Mass. Inst. Tech. 2004).

50 For a brief discussion of how metaphor creates similarity rather than "formulates some similarity antecedently existing," see *id*. at 166.

51 *Id*. at 43.

52 *Id*. at 74.

53 *Id*. at 134–35.