

# Beyond Compare

## Metaphor is crucial to the way the brain works. Is it also dangerous?

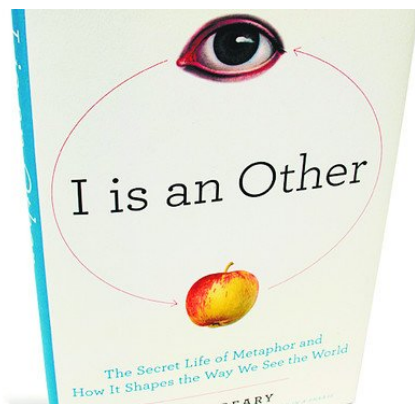
By Eric Felten

Metaphors are dangerous—or so we've been told of late, as various rhetorical tropes have been called "hate speech" and blamed for a dangerous climate of incivility. But politics has never been beanbag. Candidates *wage campaigns*; they *fight* for supremacy in *battleground states*. *Strategy* and *tactics* do much to decide who will be the *victor* and who will suffer *defeat*. And when an opportunity arises, the bold *seize the initiative*—which is what any number of commentators did within hours of last month's Tucson rampage. They accused their political foes of trafficking in metaphors that primed the gunman's mind to mayhem.

There proved to be no evidence for the accusation, but it did reflect a general suspicion that language—figurative language in particular—can move us and manipulate us in harmful ways. Which makes James Geary's "I Is an Other" especially timely. Mr. Geary proposes to show that metaphors are a key to how we think and may often determine our thinking without our knowing it.

Aristotle defined metaphor as a word or phrase that gives to one thing "a name that belongs to something else." We come to know the first thing better by recognizing its similarities to the something else. Rhetoricians have tussled for ages over whether metaphor is mere decoration, used to entertain and amuse, or whether it performs a function at the heart of language, conveying information and animating ideas.

Many have argued that language should be, at its core, literal and straightforward, that figurative language distorts our thinking. Mr. Geary quotes philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on the need to abjure metaphor. For Hobbes, we "deceive others" by using words "in other sense than that they are ordained for." Locke denounced "the artificial and figurative application of words" as the bane of "order and clearness." Metaphors "mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats."



### I Is an Other

By James Geary  
Harper, 296 pages, \$19.99

In 1936, the critic I.A. Richards challenged the notion that metaphor is just an "extra trick with words . . . a grace or ornament." He argued that the search for resemblances was the essence of how we think: "Thought is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison."

Following Richards's lead, a raft of modern brain scientists are pursuing the theory that metaphor matches the ways in which we organize our thinking. Mr. Geary's book is an effort to popularize their work, and he succeeds in making the case that metaphor is the meat of language and not a sauce.

Metaphor works, most obviously, when we recognize a similarity between two different things. It is a matter of "pattern recognition," which may be more important in the working of the brain than logic. "Early human thought proceeded by metaphor," according to Nobel Prize-winning neurobiologist Gerald Edelman. And this imprecise sort of figurative thinking is "a major source of imagination and creativity in adult life."

One of the most interesting chapters in "I Is an Other" shows how people with Asperger's syndrome have trouble understanding figurative language. Metaphors as simple as "belt-tightening" for "economizing" can perplex them as they wonder why someone trying to save money would cinch his pants. Mr. Geary suggests that people with Asperger's "find socialization and communication so difficult because so many of our daily interactions . . . are mediated by metaphor."

But is metaphor dangerous? Mr. Geary worries that, because figurative language is central to how we think, bad metaphors will lead us to bad behavior. He is eager for the scientific study of figurative language to be used to nudge us into thoughts and actions he would prefer. He is impressed with research demonstrating that, in laboratory experiments, people exposed to certain metaphors were more open to certain behaviors, an effect called "priming." "Subjects primed with words relating to cooperation," Mr. Geary says, "cooperated more on test tasks than those who were not primed."

But it is a mistake to think that the parlor tricks of the social-psych labs can be performed with any reliability on the grand stage of life. Lamenting the bellicose "axis of evil" language of the Bush administration toward Iran, Mr. Geary touts the "entirely different primes" produced by the friendly metaphors in President Barack Obama's inaugural: "Unclenched fists and extended hands," Mr. Geary writes, "invite associations of negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation." Which must be why relations with Iran have improved so dramatically, ushering in a new and welcome era of . . . oh, never mind.

One of the linguists Mr. Geary admires has formed a consultancy called Cultural Logic "that uses insights from the cognitive and social sciences to advise nonprofits on how to effectively communicate issues of public interest." Take global warming. The public is increasingly skeptical of cataclysmic climate claims, and their lack of faith, Mr. Geary says, is the result of faulty metaphors. Cultural Logic found that the average person doesn't understand what the metaphorical phrase "greenhouse gas" means and so is unmoved by it. After all, greenhouses are "nice places where plants live." What's scary about that? After hundreds of interviews with everyman subjects, Cultural Logic determined that the greenhouse metaphor should be decommissioned and replaced with a searing new image, that of the "carbon dioxide blanket."

If clunky euphemisms are the best that the psychologists of cognition can come up with when they apply their knowledge, perhaps the power of priming is less robust than advertised. Could it be that they are selling metaphor short? After all, why should we expect a fundamental mystery of the brain to be so easily exploited?

For Aristotle, a command of metaphor was "the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances." The psych-lab linguists can pump the primes all they like, but the proper use of figurative language may well remain an art rather than a science.

*Mr. Felten writes the Journal's biweekly Postmodern Times column.*