Metaphors We Strategize By

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Abstract

The metaphors of strategic management are predominantly rooted in competition in support of the objective to achieve a "competitive advantage." Drawn from military, sport, and (oftentimes incomplete) interpretations of evolutionary biology, these metaphors imply that business is a zero-sum competitive game. Metaphors are not "just" words but, rather, they impact thoughts and actions. Hence the use of competitive metaphors encourages competitive behavior in business. We argue that this misdirects the purpose of business from being about value creation and, moreover, that value creation is most effectively achieved by approaching business as a fundamentally cooperative endeavor. Furthermore, these "survival of the fittest" sorts of metaphors inhibit considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability. We call for a shift toward metaphors rooted in cooperation and as a means to do so we also call for a shift in focus from achieving "competitive advantage" toward achieving "cooperative advantage" as the objective of strategic management. We conclude by laying out some promising research avenues for further considerations.

Keywords: Metaphors, Strategic management, Cooperation

Metaphors We Strategize By

> "The essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another."
>
> -- Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 5)

> "In essence, the job of the strategist is to understand and cope with competition."
>
> -- Porter (1979/2008: 3)

Business is war. Business is a game of chess. Business is survival of the fittest. Underlying these commonly deployed metaphors of strategic management is the inference that business is fundamentally about competition. Here, the objective of strategic management has to do with determining how to achieve a "competitive advantage" for the firm (Porter 1985).

In this article we consider the metaphors of strategic management and show that these metaphors are predominantly rooted in competition. We then consider the effects this has on business. We argue that the dominance of competitive metaphors and objective to achieve a competitive advantage engenders an unnecessarily competitive environment that misdirects the purpose of business from being about value creation and inhibits considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability. We draw inspiration (and our title) from the classic *Metaphors We Live By* in which Lakoff & Johnson (1980/2003) demonstrate that metaphors are not "just" words but, rather, they impact our thoughts and actions. In fact, as Lakeoff & Johnson (1999) show, metaphors are the means through which human beings contemplate and make sense of life. This includes deep-seated philosophical considerations including the basic notion "who are we?"

We consider this question in light of individuals who comprise the business community: corporate executives, company employees, and business students.

We structure this article as follows. First, we discuss the concept of metaphors and how they shape everyday life. Next we consider the metaphors that dominate strategic management drawn from military, sport, and (oftentimes incomplete) interpretations of evolutionary biology that imply that business is a zero-sum competitive game. We then discuss how this misdirects the purpose of business from being about value creation and, furthermore, how value creation is most effectively achieved by approaching business as a fundamentally cooperative endeavor. We also consider how these competitive rooted metaphors inhibit considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability in business. We appeal for a shift in focus from achieving "competitive advantage" toward achieving "cooperative advantage" as a means to facilitate a shift toward metaphors rooted in cooperation. Finally, we lay out promising research avenues for further considerations.

Metaphors

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff & Johnson outline how metaphors are "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" (1980/2003: 3). They continue to state "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." What do Lakoff & Johnson mean by this? First, let us consider what the metaphor is and then move to consider its ramifications.

At the heart of metaphor is *inference* (1980/2003: 244). Inference regards the relating of one kind of thing in terms of another. Lakoff & Johnson (1980/2003; 1999) describe how inference is systemically achieved through the concepts of "source domain" and "target domain."

Source domain refers to the field from which the metaphor is drawn and the target domain refers to the field to which the metaphor is applied. For example, with the metaphor "business is survival of the fittest" the source domain is evolutionary biology and the target domain is the field of business. Presumably, the intent of invoking such a metaphor is to engender greater understanding regarding the field associated with the target domain (business, in this example) where this is achieved because, presumably, there is an existing understanding regarding the field associated with the source domain (evolutionary biology, in this example). (We will later revisit how the deployment of this particular metaphor represents an incomplete interpretation of evolutionary biology.)

Metaphors help our everyday understanding that grow out of our experiences with the world and our efforts to make sense of it. However, metaphors are not always innocently constructed as benign attempts for greater understanding but, rather, may be the result of strategic decisions taken by particular interest groups with the intention of impacting the thoughts and actions of other groups. For example, the recent discussions in U.S. politics regarding the Affordable Healthcare Act, and welfare benefits in the U.S. more broadly speaking, has engendered a period of strategic metaphor making by rival political interest groups. The interest groups and politicians in favor of the expansion invoke the metaphor of these policies as a social "safety net" in an effort to conjure up thoughts and images of preventing fellow citizens from falling down and realizing great bodily harm. In response, the interest groups and politicians against the expansion of social policies invoke the metaphor that these policies are instead a "hammock" in an effort to conjure up thoughts and images of individuals who are lazily napping while others do the hard work (Krugman 2012). To the degree that one of these metaphors wins out over the other in public discourse has significant effects regarding how people think and act regarding these policies.

We now revisit Lakoff & Johnson's statement that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." They further state "our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (1980/2003: 3). In this article, we focus on the concepts of business and strategic management and how our entire conceptual system of business is deeply entrenched with attention to and prescriptions for competition. To justify our investigation, we highlight the need to first raise awareness underlying conceptual systems through explicit considerations of the language used. As Lakoff & Johnson (1980/2003: 3) state:

> Our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what the system is like.

Metaphors of Strategic Management

The metaphors that dominate strategic management are drawn from military, sport, and (oftentimes incomplete or incorrect) interpretations of evolutionary biology. These metaphors infer that business is a zero-sum competitive game and comprise the underlying conceptual system relied upon for thinking and acting.

Bracker (1980) documents the historical development of the strategic management concept. He describes its roots as deeply planted in a militaristic/war tradition that is coupled with intellectual complements from economics. Audebrand (2010) builds upon Bracker's account to describe the military and war metaphors that dominate strategic management and how these prevent the advancement of the sustainability agenda. For example, militaristic and war metaphors are invoked in the imagery and models throughout strategic management textbooks. Porter's (1979/2008) "Five Forces" model is a mainstay of strategic management textbooks that directly invokes metaphors from a source domain rooted in competition with military and war. The Five Forces model itself includes adversarial terminology indicative of military speak like "*rivalry* amongst existing *competitors*," "*threat* of new entrant," and "bargaining *power* of suppliers" (italics added for emphasis). Correspondingly, corporate executives often invoke military and war metaphors such as GE's former CEO Jack Welch who regularly included war metaphors in his annual letters to stockholders to battles between GE and its competition (Amernic, Craig and Tourish 2007). Similarly, metaphors of sport are ubiquitous in strategic management and, like military metaphors, they also infer business is a zero-sum competitive game (Oliver 1999; see also von Ghyczy 2003)

Interpretations from evolutionary biology also serve as the source domain for a number of metaphors commonly invoked in strategic management where "survival of the fittest" is arguably the most well-known. Charles Darwin is commonly credited as its originator, however this is incorrect. Instead, it was the 19th Century British economist Herbert Spencer who first coined this expression some 150 years ago (Stucke 2008, p. 973; Werhane 2000; Nowak and Highfield 2011, p. 14) after having read *On the Origin of Species*. Spencer sought to apply his interpretation of evolutionary biology to the target domain of economics and commerce. The metaphor "red in tooth and claw" is another commonly deployed metaphor to indicate a hyper competitive environment drawn from the source domain of evolutionary biology and applied to the target domain of business.

Ghoshal (2005: 75) laments that the Five Forces model encourages an unnecessarily hyper-competitive worldview about businesses in which firms "must compete not only with their competitors but also with their suppliers, customers, employees, and regulators." He continues (2005:81):

> Why don't we actually acknowledge in our theories that companies survive and prosper when they simultaneously pay attention to the interests of customers, employees, shareholders, and perhaps even the communities in which they operate? Such a perspective is available, in stewardship theory for example (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997); why then do we do overwhelmingly adopt the agency model in our research…, ignoring this much more sensible proposition?

Similarly, the metaphors drawn from the source domain of evolutionary biology and applied to the target domain of business are competitive in nature, and oftentimes indicate an incomplete interpretation of evolutionary biology that make them even more competitive than what the source domain would have otherwise suggested. As described before, the expression "survival of the fittest" arose from an economist's interpretation of evolutionary biology who then applied it to the target domain of commerce. While "survival of the fittest" has since been adopted by many in the field of evolutionary biology, it is represents only a partial view of evolution given that evolution involves many co-mingled interactions of competitions and cooperation amongst species (Mayr 2001). Bowles & Gintis (2011) discuss how the desire for cooperation is so deeply embedded in the human experience and the benefits that come from it thus indicating that in order to survive, human beings must cooperate with another but they stress that cooperation is done for more than just reasons of survival. “People cooperate not only for self-interested reasons but also because they are genuinely concerned about the well-being of others, try to uphold social norms, and value behaving ethically for its own sake (2011: 1). Relatedly, Keltner (2009) coins the expression “survival of the kindest” as a challenge to the more commonly deployed expression, and elsewhere the expression “survival of the best nurtured” is discussed (see also Nowak and Highfield 2011). Hoffman (2001) relates all of this to the deep-seated concept of empathy that serves as a connector between human beings where theories proposing that individuals behave in a purely self-interested manner goes against the evidence that evidence we demonstrate a care and concern for the well-being of one another, even if it is independent of our own self-interest.

Hence, we suggest that the metaphors deployed in the name of strategic management do not adequately represent the cooperative desires of human beings. In sum, the very use of the expression “competitors” instead of an expression like “industry peers” is evidence of the competition-rooted metaphors in strategic management (Strand & Freeman, 2013). Collectively, the aforementioned metaphors infer that business is fundamentally about competition.

Purpose of Business as Value Creation

Instead, we contend that the purpose of business is fundamentally about value creation. Furthermore we contend that value creation is most effectively achieved by approaching business as a fundamentally cooperative endeavor.

This is a view consistent with the historical traditions of stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984; Freeman et al. 2010) and stewardship theory (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997). More recently, the concept of "creating shared value" has entered the discourse fueled in part because of the notoriety of its first author, Michael Porter (Porter & Kramer 2011). With statements like "the purpose of the corporation must be redefined as creating shared value, not just profit per se" (2011: 64), creating shared value exhibits a source domain is unlike that of the competition rooted source domains of the Five Forces model. Rather, creating *shared* value seems to be rooted in more cooperation and predominantly focused on value creation as opposed to value extraction.

We contend that the hegemony of the expression "competitive advantage" encourages the development and deployment of competitive based metaphors which, in turn, misdirects thinking and action related to the purpose of business being about value creation.

From Competitive Advantage toward Cooperative Advantage

A company is said to have a competitive advantage when it implements a value creating strategy that is not being simultaneously implemented by any current or potential competitors (Porter 1985; Barney 1991). While value creation is the stated objective of competitive advantage, we contend that the concept of competitive advantage has become so dominant in its own right that attention to value creation has become supplanted by attention to competition to the degree that achieving competitive advantage has become the end in its own right. Hence, we propose that it is now time to revisit the concept of competitive advantage and consider its impacts.

The recent book "Understanding Michael Porter. The Essential Guide to Competition and Strategy" published by Harvard Business Review Press considers this, and seems to acknowledge misconceptions that have arisen from the concept of competitive advantage – the chief misconception being that business is fundamentally about competition. The author, Magretta (2012, p. 63) highlights that "no term is more closely related to Michael Porter than competitive advantage" and she continues on to state:

> Managers often think about competition as a form of warfare, a zero-sum battle for dominance in which only the alphas prevail. This… is a deeply flawed and destructive way of thinking. The key to competitive success for businesses and nonprofits alike - lies in an organization's ability to create unique value…. Creating value, not beating rivals, is at the heart of competition. (p. 17)

Thus, we argue that it is time to revisit the concept of competitive advantage and consider whether it encourages the desired behavior of value creation. We propose that it does not but rather it encourages a business environment that is unnecessarily competitive as the concept of competitive advantage encourages metaphors rooted in competition that draw from highly competitive and zero-sum game source domains. We contend that at the heart of creating value is cooperation between the firm and its stakeholders– not competition - whereby we further contend that a shift toward encouraging a "cooperative advantage" is more likely to engender the sorts of metaphors rooted in cooperation and subsequent cooperative thoughts and actions for which we are calling.

As previously discussed, metaphors are not always innocently constructed as benign attempts for greater understanding but, rather, may be the result of strategic decisions taken by particular interest groups with the intention of impacting the thoughts and actions of other groups. We are deliberately encouraging this shift toward cooperative rooted metaphors.

The concept of cooperative advantage is not new (Lei et al. 1997; Ketelhohn 1993; Skrabec 1999; Cooke 2002; Dagnino and Padula 2002; Strand and Freeman 2013) but it has not yet been widely adopted. By cooperative advantage, we mean when a company implements a value creating strategy based on cooperating with its stakeholders that results in superior value creation for the company and its stakeholders (Strand and Freeman 2013).

In sum, we appeal for a shift in focus from achieving "competitive advantage" toward achieving "cooperative advantage" as a means to facilitate a shift toward metaphors rooted in cooperation.

As Businesspeople, Who Are We?

In their follow up to *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff & Johnson (1999) authored *Philosophy in the Flesh* in which they further elaborate on the fundamental reliance by human beings upon metaphors for conceptual thought. This includes deep-seated philosophical considerations including the most basic question of "who are we?" As Lakoff & Johnson show, the metaphors deploy are central to our response to this question that impact how we think and act.

As a corporate executive, are we a General of the army ready to take our troops to do battle with the enemy with an ultimate purpose to beat the competition? Or, are we a steward with responsibility for creating value for society and considering the well-being of our stakeholders? The answers to these questions directly impacts the space afforded to these executives for considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability.

As an employee, are we a foot soldier of the army who takes commands from above without question and without considerations for the potential impacts on others? Or, are we also stewards with responsibility to consider how to create value for society and to reflect upon the well-being of the company's stakeholders. Once again, the answers to these questions directly impacts the space afforded for considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability.

Finally, as business students, are we privates in training to join the army, looking up to those generals and members of the army without question? Or, are we future stewards of these companies with responsibilities to consider how we can best create value for society and to consider the well-being of the stakeholders of our future companies? Yet again, the answers to these questions directly impacts the space afforded for considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability.

Discussion

We have focused our attention on the metaphors deployed in the name of strategic management. We could also connect this at the level of theory to consider to underlying theories that have resulted in the competitive metaphors. Here, we connect with Ferraro, Pfeffer, and Sutton (2005) who describe the "self-filling" nature of social science theories:

> Theories can become self-fulfilling because they provide a language for comprehending the world. Language affects what people see, how they see it, and the social categories and descriptors they use to interpret their reality. It shapes what people notice and ignore and what they believe is and is not important (e.g., Pondy, 1978; Weick, 1979). In this sense, reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and language plays an important role in such constructions… Theories become self-fulfilling when the language

and assumptions they promulgate affect how individuals see and understand themselves and their world.

Ferraro et al. focus particular attention on the so-called neoclassical economics theories that promote the concept of the individual as a rational, self-interest maximizer. Hence, by drawing attention to the metaphors deployed, we are in effect drawing attention to the underlying theories being promoted. Thus, in promoting a different set of metaphors, we are in effect promoting a different underlying theoretical set. Previously, we identified this as stakeholder theory and stewardship theory, and the concept of creating shared value (at least in name[1]).

It follows that potentially fruitful avenues for further research include discourse focused methodologies (Taylor 2001a, Taylor 2001b) applied to the empirical environments in which the strategizing process occurs or is discussed. This includes conversation analysis, critical discourse theory and discursive practices in strategizing, textual analysis, and rhetoric analysis of strategy conversations. This environment could, for example, be within companies or within materials produced by companies as well as within business schools – such as within strategic management courses.

Furthermore, comparative case studies (Yin 2003) may prove fruitful to compare and contrast the types of strategic management metaphors deployed by different companies. Given the characterization of companies in the U.S. business context as having a "romance with competition in business" (Rosenau 2003) whereas companies in a Scandinavian context as

[1] A closer reading of Creating Shared Value (Porter & Kramer 2011), however, indicates less of a departure from rational the rational self-interest maximizer than one may have anticipated with given the article name.

having more broadly embraced cooperation in business (Strand and Freeman 2013), perhaps studies that compare different regional attributes may be promising. This particular consideration may be important given the hegemony of the U.S. in most things related to business, where considering other regions from which to draw more cooperative based metaphors may benefit this initiative.

Conclusion

In the field of strategic management we must consider elements of competition and cooperation based upon the particular contexts at hand in the process of developing more effective strategies (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1997). But attempts to elevate the importance of the cooperative aspects of strategic management to the lofty position of competition have not achieved the effect as indicated by the dominance of the competition rooted metaphors of strategic management and relative dearth of cooperation rooted metaphors. Hence considerations toward competition dominate the strategic management discourse. Given that metaphors are not "just" words but, rather, they impact thoughts and actions, we propose that the dominant use of competitive metaphors encourages unnecessarily competitive behavior in business.

In sum, we appeal for a shift in focus from achieving "competitive advantage" toward achieving "cooperative advantage" as a means to facilitate a shift toward metaphors rooted in cooperation. We contend that at the heart of creating value is cooperation between the firm and its stakeholders– not competition - whereby we further contend that a shift toward encouraging a "cooperative advantage" is more likely to engender the sorts of metaphors rooted in cooperation that are needed to subsequently impact the thinking and actions of individuals within the business community. Furthermore, we propose that by supplanting the "survival of the fittest" sorts of metaphors we can better encourage important considerations toward ethics, humanism, and sustainability in business.

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