

Editors' Preface

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At the core of human thought and expression lies the profound capacity of metaphor – the act of understanding one concept in terms of another. However, over the last decade, in response to the socio-political and ecological realities of the 'Anthropocene', disciplines like anthropology have also pointed at the limitations of human thought, highlighting its fundamental role in large scale planetary destruction. These critical enquiries into modes of thought beyond the human such as in Eduardo Kohn's path breaking work with indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon forests, challenged our perceptions about the 'field' of thinking and communication as the sole domain of humans.



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It is with such a renewed orientation of metaphors that we organised our PhD symposium, *Metaphors: Conceptualising Horizons of Meaning*, held from the 26th to the 28th of February 2024 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The present volume aims at exploring some of these perspectives. The symposium was the result of a collective endeavour by the doctoral candidates of the PhD in Asian and African Studies, XXXVIII cycle, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice: Rebecca Ciattini, Wenxin Jin, Cien Liang, Laura Locatelli, Michele Pulini, Michele Scarlassara, Kesang Thakur, and Claudia Zancan.

The intellectual premise of the symposium was to explore how the concept of “metaphor” is approached across a diverse spectrum of research fields. Building on the paradigm shift initiated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which established metaphor not as a mere linguistic flourish but as a fundamental cognitive device, our intent was to map both its conceptual and material potentials. The call for papers invited scholars to investigate metaphors as a dynamic force: a tool for challenging dominant narratives, and shaping decolonial practices; an interpretive key to the material and visual cultures of the past; a political instrument that shapes identities and power relations; a lens through which reading the spaces we live in; and even a foundational component of the methodologies that disciplines use to understand themselves. The overarching goal, which this volume seeks to carry forward, was thus to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue exploring not only what metaphors are, but what they do—how they actively construct, contest, and define our conceptual horizons.

Hosted in the prestigious Aula Baratto at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the organisational journey began in April 2023, with a call for papers that garnered an overwhelming response of over 100 abstracts from scholars worldwide. Guided by the core criteria of originality and thematic pertinence, the selection process aimed to cultivate a comprehensive overview that included contributions on China, Japan, the Indian Subcontinent, Iran, North Africa, South America, and Europe, among other regions. Moreover, alongside a broad, large-scale perspective and a mosaic of viewpoints on different regions of the world, one section of the conference was dedicated to the city of Venice. This part offered insight into how major themes related to the symposium's host city — including its representation in literature and cinema, its archaeology, and the impacts of climate change, among others — intertwine with metaphors and figurative language. The result was a rich and dynamic programme structured around eight thematic panels: *Metaphors We Live In: Entanglements of Spaces, Literature, and Art*; *Venice's Metaphorical Tapestry: Weaving Symbols and Stories from Stone to Sea*; *Rethinking Dominant Metaphors: The Politics and Poetics of*

Resistance; Unearthing Metaphors: Materialization of the Intangible in Archaeology, Art, and Museum Studies; Talking Magic and Religion Through the Power of Metaphors: Textuality, Materiality, and Gesture; More than Human Metaphors: Unravelling Nature, Narratives and Futurity; World Philology; and Interpreting the World, Delving into the Self: Perception, Self-Perception, and Metaphors. These were complemented by an introductory session, *Building the Linguistic Groundwork: Metaphors as a Lens to Understand Reality*. Each organiser also served as chair for the panel most aligned with their academic expertise, overseeing a total of 33 presentations. The three-day event was enriched by keynote lectures from four distinguished scholars: Mieke Bal (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Ernst van Alphen (Leiden University, Netherlands), James St. André (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China), and Andrea Molesini (Writer, Italy). Their contributions provided not only a focused lens on the symposium's central theme but also a personal and cultural enrichment, demonstrating the diverse ways in which metaphors can be understood and articulated.

From the rich array of papers presented, this volume brings together a curated selection. In doing so, we have sought to feature contributions from across the thematic panels and to maintain a balanced representation of the diverse area studies showcased at the symposium. Our aim is to provide a collection that is not only a faithful reflection of the symposium, but also a cohesive and multifaceted exploration of metaphor.

We are honoured, therefore, that this collection opens with 'Inter-ships: Metaphors as encounters', an essay by our esteemed keynote speaker, Professor Mieke Bal. In it, she offers a compelling reconceptualisation of metaphor, returning to its etymological roots as an act of 'moving'. Proposing the active verb 'metaphoring' to describe the socially crucial activity of creating neologisms, Bal demonstrates how coining terms such as 'refugee-dom' can serve as a potent metaphor for changing our outlook on urgent social issues. Her chapter sets a powerful tone, immediately illustrating the real-world implications of how we conceptualise and deploy metaphors.

The act of 'metaphoring' that Professor Bal so powerfully articulates is a guiding thread for the contributions that follow. The chapters gathered here, introduced below in alphabetical order for the sake of clarity in this preface, take up this challenge across a diverse range of disciplines.

Alice Casalini's contribution, "The Art of Crossing Over: Aquatic Metaphors in Gandhāra", provides a compelling case study of metaphor extending beyond the textual into the visual and spatial realms. Seeking to bridge a gap between literary analysis and archaeology, Casalini investigates how the central Buddhist concept of liberation is articulated through aquatic visual metaphors in Gandhāran art.

Her argument is that the deliberate placement of such imagery within the transitive spaces of stūpas serves a distinct didactic and spiritual purpose. The chapter ultimately reveals how architecture itself can become a metaphorical medium, shaping a space that is not merely a background for devotion but an active participant in the religious experience of traversing towards enlightenment.

The volume also features Claudio Gebbia's "Chinese Neologisms and Metaphorical Potential in Pedagogy", which explores metaphor as the cognitive force behind linguistic innovation in contemporary China. Moving beyond mere classification, Gebbia provides an overview of how metaphorical structures drive the formation and diffusion of neologisms, especially those emerging from the digital sphere. He contends that these expressions do more than fill lexical gaps; they serve as concrete manifestations of conceptual metaphors and cognitive blends. Drawing on the foundational theories of Lakoff, Johnson, and Fauconnier, the chapter ultimately highlights the pedagogical relevance of neologisms. By unpacking their metaphorical origins, educators can offer students a powerful lens into the cognitive and cultural dimensions, reframing language acquisition not as rote memorisation but as an active engagement with the conceptual patterns that shape meaning.

Elsa Gios and Nabila Tavolieri's chapter interrogates three key concepts within postcolonial theory—'margin', 'centre', and 'resistance'. Drawing from critical interpretations of these concepts within Black feminist theory and decolonial theory, the authors challenge their dominant understandings as mere abstractions, instead, reframing the concepts as capable of driving concrete socio-political outcomes. Further, resistance is rendered tangible in the very act of writing specific 'field' encounters in two seemingly distinct research contexts—popular education in Bogotá, Colombia and antiracism in Switzerland—as poetic interjections. ConversA(c)tion is proposed as both a method and a form of resistance against hierarchical modes of knowledge production, and towards the collective affirming of knowledge as relational, situated and processual.

Sarah Puetzer's chapter offers a compelling example of how metaphors and figurative language serve as key tools for understanding space, and how, at the same time, physical space, particularly urban space, interacts with literature. She explores the work of contemporary Japanese poet Saihate Tahi, focusing especially on her immersive poetic spaces and the installation *Shi no kasoku*, which dynamically engages with the urban environment and reshapes readers' perceptions of the surrounding city. Drawing on the works of theorists of space such as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, Puetzer analyzes literary practices related to space by imagining a walk through

Saihate Tahi's installation. The author, then, explores Shi no kasoku as a site of resistance and highlights its political implications within an urban environment that is never neutral.

Tonio Savina's chapter provides a timely analysis of metaphor as a deliberate instrument of statecraft and diplomatic narrative. He focuses on one of the core tenets of the PRC's current foreign policy: the metaphor of a "community of common destiny for humankind". Savina's contribution sheds light on how this powerful framing device is being extended to a new frontier—outer space. His analysis reveals the strategic ambition behind this metaphorical expansion, showing how it is used to contest existing power structures and to project China's vision for a new global order, both on Earth and beyond.

Lukas Seidler's chapter critically explores the term "sea-level rise" beyond its oceanographic meaning, as, according to the author, it relies on a colonial approach to the ocean and is characterised by a lack of affective resonance in neoliberal contexts, as noted in the figure of the climate refugee. Seidler reconceptualises, then, the term "sea-level rise", and suggests "swelling horizons" as an alternative to highlight how it materialises across a multiplicity of times and spaces, thus departing from the terrestrial understandings of the former. By exploring a wide theoretical framework, drawing, in particular, on the critical theories of Édouard Glissant, the author critiques the existing dominant discourses surrounding the idea of "sea-level rise", highlighting its embeddedness in power structures, both colonial and contemporary, re-orienting the concept by reading it from a de-colonial angle and offering a more complex and layered conceptual response.

Xiaoyu Zhang's paper explores how cave metaphors shape Daoist perception of cosmogony, sacred geography and the human body. Her work pictures the Daoist three-tiered vision of the world—hollow cave, grotto-heaven and grotto-chamber, revealing the interconnectivity between the universe and human beings. Apart from it, this chapter also represents the transformations and applications of Daoist cave metaphors in Chinese literature and gardening art. It not only helps us re-understand the interactivity and relationality among the universe, Earth and human beings through the Daoist lens of cave, but also suggests how metaphor functions in reshaping nature and the world.

To conclude, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to the success of the symposium and the publication of this volume. From its inception, the project has been guided by the invaluable supervision of Professor Nicoletta Pesaro, our PhD coordinator, who fostered an intellectually stimulating environment for the development of groundbreaking ideas. We are also deeply grateful for the generous financial support of the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari

University and our PhD programme. Our sincere appreciation goes to all the participants, whose insights enriched the discussions, and particularly to the authors whose work is featured in these pages. It is our hope that this collection will not only serve as a record of a vibrant academic exchange but will also inspire further inquiry into the conceptual horizons that metaphors continually invite us to explore.