Author Queries & Comments:

AQ1 : The year for "Morgan 1997" has been changed to 2006 to match the entry in the references list. Please provide revisions if this is incorrect.

Response: Please change this into Morgan 1986. I have changed the entry in the references list at the end of the paper. The reason for the confusion is that the book is very famous, and was reprinted many times; 1986 is the first edition.

AQ2 : The disclosure statement has been inserted. Please correct if this is inaccurate.

Response: Resolved

CM1 :

The star should not be at the end of the title. The star should be moved to after the question mark in **What's in a word?**

CM2 : "is built on the liberal assumption that women and minorities should assimilate to the current practices of science" is a quotation! Please signal that.

CM3 : "may unwittingly reproduce problematic assumptions concerning gender" is a quotation! Please signal that.

What's in a word? On the use of metaphors to describe the careers of women academics *[1]

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*. 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other word would smell as sweet' (William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II).

ABSTRACT

Various metaphors are used in the literature and media to refer to the careers and experiences of women academics. In the wake of the fascinating debate in the literature surrounding the adequacy of these expressions, considerable effort has been devoted to the pursuit of 'the ideal metaphor': one that is comprehensible, inclusive, intersectional, empowering; acknowledges the agency of women and all social actors within the organisation; and meets a number of other high standards. Drawing on classic arguments in the communication sciences, I argue that metaphors can hinder access to the conceptual content of one's research and reasoning. I regard that as a potential problem, as one of the primary goals of such research is inclusion. I also contend that the use of figurative language, usually opaque and indirect, may reveal that the topic of women's careers in academia is emotionally charged, bordering on the taboo. Finally, I problematise the assumption that underlies much of the literature: that the use of particular metaphors can influence behaviour and power relations.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; language; leadership; women; discourse analysis; narratives

The pursuit of the ideal metaphor

Various metaphors are used in the literature and in the media to refer to women academics, their careers and experiences. Most

of these metaphors draw either from the natural world or from the terminology of engineering and architecture. They refer to invisible but invincible forces that overpower individuals. One example is 'black hole', a metaphor popular in Finland up until a few years ago to indicate the large proportion of female academics whose academic career ends after the doctorate or postdoc (Husu 2000). Other examples of such metaphors are 'glass ceiling' and 'leaking pipeline'. 'Glass ceiling' refers to an invisible barrier that prevents particular groups from rising above a certain level in an organisational hierarchy (Morley 1994; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995; Bain and Cummings 2000; Williams 2005; Jackson and O'Callaghan 2009; Sabatier 2010). 'Leaking pipeline' (Alper and Gibbons 1993; Clark Blickenstaff 2005) has been used especially to refer to the careers of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths). Women gravitate away from STEM careers, at multiple stages; this movement is attributed to internalised stereotypes as well as various types of career hindrances (Chesler et al. 2010; Dasgupta and Stout 2014). The 'pipeline' metaphor has attracted strong criticism, also in recent years (Allen and Castleman 2001; Cannady, Greenwald, and Harris 2014); nonetheless, the phrase is still very much used to refer to the career of women in general, and also in academia, especially in analyses that focus on marriage and fertility as factors that contribute to women abandoning the career track (Wolfinger, Mason and Goulden 2008), on access to entry stage jobs in academia (White 2004), gender disparity in high-level positions (Xu 2008) and the (perceived) barriers to becoming professors (Van Anders 2004; Settles et al. 2006).

In their comprehensive review of the international literature on metaphors on women in academia between 2004 and 2013, Amery and colleagues (2015) list several other figurative expressions, some referring to women's experiences, others to the structural and institutional context in which these experiences take place. The phrases listed include 'mothers', 'housekeepers' (Spanò 2017), 'maids', 'ivory basement' and 'ivory tower' (Kreissl et al. 2015), 'slippery paths' (Wilson et al. 2010) and 'chilly climate' (Savigny 2014). In particular contexts, emotionally charged metaphors have been coined, including 'donkeys of the university' (Mabokela 2003). Academia has been depicted as a 'jungle' (O'Brien and Hapgood 2012). The growth in the number of metaphors on women in academia reflects a general trend. In her recent literature review of figurative phrases on women in organisations, Kemp (2016) produces a very extensive list of over 60 different entries, organised into clusters.

The use of metaphors on women in academia has been problematised in the literature, along the lines of Morgan's well-known analysis of metaphors in understanding organisations (Morgan 2006**[AQ1]**). In her landmark, insightful contribution, Husu (2001) observed that the 'pipeline' metaphor is built on the liberal assumption that women and minorities should assimilate to the current practices of science.[2]

She then proceeded to criticise the 'pipeline' metaphor for failing to give insight on how the 'structure and practices of current institutions' that actively reproduce gender inequality 'need to change'; to convey the same idea, Allen and Castleman (2001) coined the phrase 'pipeline fallacy'. Husu was also critical of phrases that postulate the existence of invisible but powerful barriers (such as 'glass ceiling' or 'black hole') for failing to address human agency and the role of various groups, forces and social processes in creating and maintaining these barriers. These metaphors are 'passive, deterministic and disempowering' and provide no insight on women's behaviour, strategies and resistance, and on the responsibility of the scientific community and of its actors (Husu 2001). The 'glass ceiling' metaphor, and its effects on knowledge production, were later problematised by other prominent contributors (Benschop and Brouns 2009; Bendl and Schmidt 2010).

Indeed, metaphors drawn from the natural world, or from the world of engineering and architecture, do fail to capture that women's career progression is not a natural phenomenon, but a direct consequence of decisions made by specific social actors. The individual woman whose career is affected may certainly experience these decisions as opaque and incomprehensible, and feel at the mercy of the elements: therefore, these metaphors capture an important psychological feature of the individual woman's situation in academia. But they are inadequate from the point of view of the sociologist, the organisation studies scholar and the policy-maker.

Husu (2001) was also critical of metaphors that focus on women, as opposed to the scientific community. These problematise woman 'as women', while men in academia have seldom been problematised 'as men'. This contention has later been developed by other influential scholars (Eagly and Carli 2007; Bruckmüller et al. 2013). Remarkably, to date, there is hardly any metaphor in the literature referring to the careers and experiences of men academics. A number of figurative phrases are used in the literature and apparently allude to men, but in actuality refer to academia as an institution and a community and to emphasise the marginalisation of women. Academia has been depicted as an 'old boys' club' of formal and informal networks that exclude women (Amery et al. 2015) and as a 'male emporium' where women 'learn to labour' (Acker and Dillabough 2007). The absence of men-specific metaphors offers support to the argument advanced by Husu: men academics are still perceived as the norm, while women are systematically problematised and 'othered'. There is a 'glass escalator' metaphor, popularised in the literature to suggest that men enjoy an automatic, invisible and unearned competitive advantage if they work in traditionally women-dominated professions (Williams 1992). The academic is not one such profession, and I have not encountered any use of the phrase with reference to men who work in academia.

There are later reviews of metaphors on women leaders that classify the metaphors in two groups: figurative expressions implying that women play a role in creating the problem, such as 'mommy track', are juxtaposed to phrases such as 'concrete ceiling' that do not seem to have that implication (Smith, Caputi, and Crittenden 2012).

In the wake of the fascinating debate in the literature, started by Husu, surrounding the adequacy of these metaphors, considerable efforts have been devoted to the pursuit of the ideal metaphor (Benschop and Brouns 2009). The ideal metaphor should first and foremost not portray women as passive, it has been argued. It should acknowledge that women have agency and are able and willing to resist practices that they perceive as not acceptable, and to actively work to change institutions and structures; at the same time, the metaphor should capture the agency of *all* social actors within the organisation. Even more

sophisticatedly, the ideal metaphor should express the 'interdependent relationship of structure and agency' and 'reveal the contingent nature of structures and the practices that sustain them' (Amery et al. 2015), already theorised by feminist thinkers (Acker 1992) but so far not yet encapsulated in one single figurative expression. The ideal metaphor should not emphasise the individual level, as that would amount to implanting liberal feminist notions in the organisational discourse; and it should acknowledge that gender inequality is not confined to particular levels in the organisation (Benschop and Brouns 2009). It has also been argued that the ideal metaphor should show how women's own learned behavioural patterns can work against their career, and a new phrase has been coined: 'sticky floor' (Shambaugh 2007), which has, however, been criticised for suggesting that once women escape the 'floor', there are no further barriers to their professional success (Carli and Eagly 2016). Other expressions have been coined, that seem, however, to suffer from the same limitations as other metaphors already in use. 'Glass cliff' (Bruckmüller et al. 2014; Peterson 2014) means that women typically get to attain leadership roles during periods of crisis or in problematic organisational circumstances, but the phrase does not capture agency at all; nor does 'labyrinth' (Carli and Eagly 2016), in spite of being a fascinating and innovative conceptualisation of women in organisations. Moreover, it has been argued that the ideal metaphor should represent intersecting identities, as opposed to solely focusing on gender (Amery et al. 2015).

All of the above is a very ambitious catalogue of demands to put on a word or two. These high expectations are the reason for the gradual transition, in recent years, from one- or two-word metaphors to longer and more complex figurative expressions, whole phrases such as 'crafting the elastic self' (Devine, Grummell, and Lynch 2011) or 'slaying the seven-headed dragon' (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). The latter has been praised as 'a model metaphor', in that

> it acknowledges the dynamic nature of gendered structures, crucially paves the way for recognition of intersectionality, and implies the existence of agents, however constrained by their situation. (Amery et al. 2015)

All of which is true, except that 'slaying the seven-headed dragon' is not one metaphor, but three: the act of slaying represents women's behaviour and agency[1]; the dragon represents gendered structures and practices; the seven heads refer to the ubiquity and resilience of such structures and practices. This is a highly complex use of figurative language for purposes of social analysis and social change. The more intricate and elaborate the expression, both syntactically and semantically, the heavier the demands it places on the interpreter's capacity to recover its meaning, the greater the odds that the interpreter will fail to do so. Who will understand metaphors, and particularly clusters of metaphors, however brilliantly and carefully and competently engineered? They seem hardly accessible to the non-initiated; and crucially, an increase in complexity renders them even less accessible. Prominent organisation studies scholars have argued that the heuristic value of a metaphor resides primarily in its comprehensibility (Cornelissen and Kafouros 2008). I agree on this fundamental point. 'Metaphoricity' comes in degrees. The spectrum ranges from expressions akin to literal language, to opaque locutions requiring extensive interpretive effort. The most informative metaphors are close to literal speech and possess a transparent semantic structure. Our language is rich in such limpid and accessible figurative expressions; one example is 'the peak of a career', which, however, may be too similar to literal discourse to count as metaphor proper.

I shall now develop the argument in a partially different direction, and make a case against the use of metaphors on women academics. My contribution will draw on the literature pertaining to this particular subfield, as well as the works discussing the use of metaphors in organisations in general, to the extent that the considerations made there are material to my argument.

Inclusivity through accessibility

Metaphors presuppose language users who can understand them. This requirement is particularly problematic for newly coined metaphors. Introducing a metaphor implies creating a division, at least temporary, and possibly permanent, between language users who can understand the metaphor and are able to use it in the appropriate context, and others who are not able to do so. Like all non-literal, potentially opaque use of language, metaphors can be exclusionary, but gender scholarship aims for inclusivity. Several examples could be made here. One is as follows. There are women who encounter marginalisation and ostracism in their professional lives, and do not possess the cultural or linguistic tools to understand the metaphors and figurative expressions created to convey such experiences in an evocative and concise fashion.

A further observation is in order, moving beyond the perspective of the individual and embracing the point of view of groups and cultures. Metaphors and idiomatic expressions are language- and culture-specific (Carter 1997). They are often exceptionally hard to translate, or not translatable (Van den Broeck 1981; Schäffner 2004). Readers and speakers from cultures other than the one in which a particular figurative expression was coined may not possess a corresponding expression in their own language, nor the linguistic and conceptual background and instruments required to decipher the foreign metaphor; which again undermines the inclusive ideal that metaphors on women in academia are intended to support (Littlemore 2001; Littlemore et al. 2011; Carrol, Littlemore, and Gillon Dowens 2018).

The question of metaphors and inclusivity can best be examined against the backdrop of classic works in linguistics. H.P. Grice introduced the 'cooperative principle' in communication sciences. The principle describes how effective communication is achieved socially, through active cooperation between speakers and listeners (Grice 1975). The cooperative principle involves four rules for effective communication, known as Grice's maxims: quality, referring to the truthfulness of what one says; quantity, meaning that one's contribution must be as informative as it is required for the purposes of the exchange, neither more nor less; relation, meaning that the contribution should be relevant to the communication, and manner, referring to the avoidance of obscurity, ambiguity, prolixity and confusion. Human communication does not follow all four rules all the time. When the meaning of a phrase seems inconsistent with Grice's maxims, the listener will draw inferences, search meanings implied but not explicitly conveyed ('implicatures'), and attempt to recover the intended sense.

Let us now apply Grice's elegant theory to newly introduced idiomatic phrases and other expressions that require figurative interpretation. These expressions pose a problem, particularly before they have achieved the status of conventional expressions, when their meaning is not yet understood by most speakers: they may violate all four Grice's maxims at the same time (Eco 1986). They are not truthful, because they cannot be taken literally (quality rule). They are obscure to the non-initiated (manner rule). They add extra information that is neither strictly indispensable (quantity rule), nor relevant (relation rule) to the communication that is taking place. They *may* become indispensable and relevant, but only after having become generally understood. A simultaneous violation of several of Grice's maxims makes it very difficult for the listener or the reader to activate the relevant implicatures and access the meaning of the metaphor. It is therefore not prudent to introduce idiomatic phrases, and particularly novel figurative expressions, in the public debate on matters of fundamental importance to society, such as the professional lives of women. Excellent communication is crucial here, and phrases that violate basic communication principles, as stated by Grice, are not the most efficient way to achieve it.

The introduction and use of such phrases can also have unintended consequences, not limited to the exclusion of some language users. One cannot control the interpretations that novel metaphors can generate; this can lead to misunderstandings and to the formation and cementing of different, incompatible meanings, attributed to expressions originally introduced for purposes of unification and empowerment. One other factor that has the potential to hinder quality communication is the accumulation of metaphors. The process of metaphor-creation and the search for the ideal metaphor on women academics has started decades ago and has seen the active involvement of some of the most proficient experts in the field. Numerous figurative expressions on women in academia currently coexist in the literature and public debate; only very few have been abandoned and new ones are continuously created as the search continues; older and more recent phrases now live side by side and even compete against each other!

Some of these figurative expressions constitute a narrative that is very prevalent in the literature, in the media and in the public debate in general (Williams et al. 2016). For this reason, one could in principle argue that abandoning the use of metaphors that refer to the careers of women academics may create practical problems. However, persisting in using them generates major practical difficulties, too. The mere fact that particular figurative expressions are used with a high frequency does not entail that they are established, comprehensible and comprehended. Not all users and recipients understand and interpret such phrases in the same manner. This argument is especially relevant for the general public, and for users and recipients who are not researchers or gender experts and may find idiomatic expressions in this field more difficult to decipher.

As gender scholars, inclusivity ought to remain our primary focus and concern; and inclusivity also comprises multi- and interdisciplinarity, internationality and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), defined as the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination (Davis 2008). Inclusivity is of special importance to support current efforts of mainstreaming gender into higher-education curricula (Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González 2018).

Metaphors as disguises

The use of metaphors to refer to the careers and experiences of women academics can be problematised from another perspective, one that has not yet received adequate consideration in the literature. In natural language, metaphors and idiomatic expressions are also used in correspondence of cultural taboos and emotionally charged topics, such as sex, or death. 'To kick the bucket' is an example. The expression is purely figurative, as no kicking takes place, and no bucket is involved when one dies; it is not immediately understandable to the non-initiated; if translated literally in other languages, the non-literal, non-referential meaning of the phrase would be incomprehensible. A metaphor in such contexts is, essentially, an euphemism:

> a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.[2]

One would be tempted to wonder what we really are doing when we coin and use idiomatic, non-literal expressions and metaphors to refer to women in academia. Are we trying to shed light on invisible experiences, by assigning an appropriate name to phenomena that did not have a satisfactory one previously; or are we rather unwittingly concealing those phenomena? This is not to imply that the use of a figure of speech *creates* the taboo; rather, it is the other way around: when a topic is too emotionally charged, it is difficult to refer to it directly and explicitly; when discussing it, one is more prone to circumvent it and elude direct references. Does the relatively copious use of figurative expressions in the literature on women in academia reveal something about *our* feelings on this question? 'Our' includes us, gender scholars, whose work aims, among other goals, to breaking down centuries-old taboos. Metaphors veil, rather than unveiling. Driver (2017) analysed the use of metaphors in organisational theory with the conceptual tools of psychoanalysis, drawing on the work of prominent contributors in the field such as Lacan. She contended that

> metaphors can be explored as symptoms of our struggles with unconscious desire […] that tell us more by what they leave out than what they leave in.

In their contribution entitled 'Glass slippers, Holy Grails and Ivory Towers: gender and advancement in academia', Harris, Ravenswood, and Myers (2013) cleverly pointed out that some of the most popular metaphors seem to coincide with traditional, time-honoured clichés of legendary sagas and fairy tales!

Metaphors and behaviour: competing epistemologies

Finally, a methodological note. It has been argued that the goal of the pursuit of the ideal metaphor is 'to contribute to, or help accelerate, the creation of a fairer and more inclusive academy' (Amery et al. 2015). The debate on metaphors on women in

academia builds on a more fundamental epistemological presupposition: it assumes that language influences behaviour, and affects power relationships. This conjecture is by no means unproblematic. It could be argued that the opposite is true: language, and especially semantics, is at least in part a social construct; as such it is dependent on, and influenced by, power relationship and power structures in society. Alternatively, one could contend that language and behaviour shape each other and the influence is mutual. In the words of Wajcman (1991)

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the basis of men's power is not simply a product of the ideas we hold and the language we use, but
of all the social practices that give men authority over women. Ideas are mediations of social
relations[.] […]
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Ideally, the tenability of each of these hypotheses ought to be tested empirically. However, to test the impact of metaphors on *thoughts and perceptions* is one matter; to investigate the effect of the use of particular metaphors on *actual behaviour and power relations* within the organisation is another matter altogether. Such a study would pose substantial methodological challenges; in particular, the numerous confounds would probably make the challenges insurmountable.

It has been rightly argued that metaphors may unwittingly reproduce problematic assumptions concerning gender[3] (Husu 2001).

Language does reproduce our assumptions; but whether it *shapes* our assumptions, and through that, our behaviour, that is a different question; it may well be that we are attributing to metaphors and language a power to change structures and institutions that in fact metaphors and language are far from possessing. Disentangling these intricate epistemological questions is beyond the scope of this paper. The hypothesis that metaphors on women academics can and do influence behaviour and power relations is by no means tested. However, throughout this paper I have presumed, for the sake of the argument, that metaphors do influence behaviour; and I have analysed and problematised the use metaphors on women in academia from a different perspective. I have postulated that language is one of the main resources available to human culture, allowing us to express meaning both metaphorically and not; I have treated figurative speech as an asset, rather than a defining feature of human language. I have pondered how the two resources, literal and figurative language, can best be used critically in society. I have contended that literal language is at least as valuable an asset as figurative language; and in particular contexts, the former may be preferable. Just as metaphors can be conceived of as a resource that one can use constructively to express meaning and critically to uncover aspects of the world that literal language cannot easily reveal, so is literal language a resource, whose constructive and critical use can unveil the limitations of figurative language. I submit that where metaphors fail, it makes sense to restore concepts and meanings through literal language.

Conclusions

I have argued that the use of figurative expressions in gender research literature on women in academia has the potential to hinder access to the conceptual content of the research. I regard that as a potential problem, because one of the primary goals of such research is communication and inclusion. I have also contended that the use of opaque, indirect language such as metaphors on the careers of women in academia may reveal that the topic is emotionally charged, bordering on the taboo, and there is a natural reluctance to discuss it in a more straightforward, referential, and ultimately, inclusive language. Finally, I have problematised the assumption that underlies much of the literature on metaphors on the careers of women in academia: that such metaphors can influence behaviour and power relations.

Based on these arguments, my conclusion is that the ambitious efforts made in the literature in pursuit of the ideal metaphor on women in academia are captivating and fascinating from a purely intellectual perspective, and often ingenious; but they ultimately lead to conceptual opacity in a field that by its nature aims to inclusion. Inclusion can best be achieved through the use of literal and referential language and, I shall add, conscious and constant efforts to avoid jargon and the deliberate pursuit of linearity and clarity in one's prose, to the extent that doing so is possible without trivialising and oversimplifying the content of one's arguments and research.

Notes

1. 'Slaying' here may be descriptive (a synthetic account of current historical processes) or prescriptive. ✗
2. *Oxford* Dictionary. ✗

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author**[AQ2]**.

Notes on contributor

Sofia Moratti is currently affiliated with the 'Balanse' program, a nationwide project on gender balance in Norwegian academia. She received her doctorate from the University of Groningen, the Netherlands (2009). She worked at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, as a 'Max Weber' postdoctoral fellow and later as a senior researcher (2011–2015). She published extensively in various international journals on a variety of topics, including women's access to birth control.

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