Abstract:
Every decision making process on sensitive issues involves a certain amount of symbolic transactions. Especially the political part of the process is often a matter of ‘translating’ complex problems into powerful images through metaphors. Political actors and their institutions are highly sensitive to metaphors, because metaphors often form the core of the stories actors themselves construct, believe and use. The search for metaphors used in practice can be seen as the point of departure for interpretive research into political practices. Political actors are in need of strong metaphors showing a way out of complex dilemmas. Metaphors can prove to be ‘harder’ than the ‘facts’ that politicians use for action.

This paper examines the way a decision making process can be understood through the use of metaphors. Two metaphors, both the central part of two different stories about a decision to be taken in the Dutch municipality R., prove to be guiding for the perception and action for a range of political actors. The decision to be made concerns the location of a new municipal centre. The first metaphor, a centre is a heart, creates ambiguity as a result of the two sides it stresses: the heart as a symbol of love and as a symbol of life. The second metaphor draws the attention from the question where a new centre should be built, to the importance of taking a decision. Overall the case study shows that political actors are guided by a ‘play of metaphors’ they cannot always control.

Introduction
The paper you are about to read is directed at the general question of the value of metaphors-in-practice for describing and understanding politics. The answer can be formulated when we have an idea of the role metaphors play in practice. Therefore this paper focuses on a political decision making process. After a brief introduction of the concept of metaphor, a division is made between studying practice and theory. Then, an interpretive point of departure is presented and the specific features of metaphors in politics are discussed. The second part the paper goes on to examine a decision making process in a municipality in the Netherlands. Two metaphors that structure the process are described. The paper ends with an assessment of the role of metaphors in decision making and politics.
1. Metaphor

As a Concept
Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that the conceptual system at the basis of our thoughts and acts is largely metaphorical. In accordance with that idea, this paper treats metaphors as powerful devices people possess to understand events and objects in the complex world that surrounds them. Metaphors in general enable people to understand phenomena in terms of other phenomena that they or their audience have more experience with, insight into or feel more affinity for. Understanding then is ascribing meaning and therefore an act of (re)creation. People use these meanings for the symbolic (re)structuring of the past, present and future into a more or less consistent whole.

Metaphors are important organising instruments, because they draw attention to certain parts of reality and ignore others (Edelman 1967). As Yanow (1992) stated, they can be both models of reality and models for reality. On the one hand they represent reality. On the other hand, through the emphasis they place on the characteristics the two parts of the metaphor share, they (can) create a ‘guideline’ for action in the future. This move from description to prescription is what Rein and Schön called ‘the normative leap’ (Rein and Schön 1977). The idea that metaphors are used to guide action does not mean that people have a firm grip on the metaphors at work. The second part of a metaphor (called vehicle or modifier) has certain characteristics (e.g. power or familiarity of the image) that make it interesting to the user, but metaphors can and do create unintended and unforeseen meanings once they are part of a public sphere.

In Theory and in Practice
Human understanding is in a great deal metaphorical. People understand reality through metaphors on a daily basis. Analysis of this metaphorical understanding, distinguishing it for a moment from metaphorical understanding itself, can focus either on theory or on practice (Yanow 1992). In the case of theory the interest is in the way researchers use metaphors to gain insight into complex phenomena (e.g. Landau 1972) and how that activity structures knowledge about those phenomena. In the second case metaphors originate in the field, where the metaphors are ‘picked up’. This kind of metaphors is called ‘metaphors-in-use’ or ‘metaphors-in-practice’. They can belong to or form the centre of stories in practice (Stone 2002).

In the first case the researcher studies science itself (e.g. the way the state is seen as an organism in political science influences the theoretical understanding of the concept of the state), in which case it is not necessary that the actors in the field the science studies themselves use this metaphor to
talk about objects or events. In the second case the researcher investigates the way metaphorical thinking structures everyday language in practice situations (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), in which meanings are, deliberately or not, produced by the use of metaphor, e.g. the way seeing the state as a human being, for instance Charles de Gaulle, in the French political arena influences the practical understanding of France as a state.

As an Interpretive Tool
This paper is directed at the use of metaphor in practice. To be more precise, it explores metaphorical thinking in the field, showing how a small number of metaphors can structure a complex process. When we look at metaphors in science, they can be seen as an important part of the interpretive toolkit, next to narratives, rituals and myths etc. The scientist’s job is to find and show metaphors and their relationships, but doing that is not a one-way track. The statement that metaphors are inescapable, implicates that analysis of metaphorical understanding itself is metaphorical understanding. It uses the root-metaphor “understanding is a metaphorical reasoning” as its point of departure. It is therefore unrealistic to claim a way out of metaphors through the study of metaphors as Schön (1993) seemed to suggest (Miller 1985).

Talking about metaphors means using metaphors. Moreover, the analysed metaphors themselves -especially when they are not used in a very straightforward, ‘literal’ way in the field- are always adopted because they are highlighted and elaborated on to gain insight into the field.

Metaphors, thus, serve simultaneously as a device or a tool for practitioners and scientists. The latter can create his or her own metaphors to emphasize, unravel and demystify one or more metaphors at work in the field (analysis of metaphorical understanding) and in this way to understand the field through metaphors. This means that the political scientist produces his understanding of reality through the tool called ‘metaphor’, which gives him the ability to structure his reading and writing. The search for metaphors used in practice can be seen as the point of departure for interpretive research into political practices. Research into metaphors can be conducted through the production of ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz 1993) of the different metaphors in the field within their context.

In Politics
So far this paper has talked about the way metaphors can serve as a way of both understanding complexity and organising it. Metaphors-in-practice provide a way of looking at phenomena that are hard to describe and even harder to explain without a notion of the symbolic way people understand their worlds. Now we should investigate the possible role of metaphors in politics. Following Edelman’s (e.g. Edelman 1988) observations, the symbolic side of public life is crucial in politics. There are many ‘translations’ to be
made, because the diversity of actors and frames is large, e.g. politicians, civil servants, press, public. Hence in political science and related disciplines the common use of metaphors in political language is an additional reason to examine metaphors.

Apart from their omnipresence in politics, the use of metaphors in politics emphasises one of the possible uses of metaphors. Metaphors in politics are not just used to comprehend, they are often used in their ability to legitimize certain patterns of action (Edelman 1967; Lakoff 1991). Political actors and their institutions are highly sensitive to metaphors, because metaphors form the core of the stories they themselves construct, believe and use for their actions. They (tacitly or not) know that metaphors can be “effective in shaping the issues and the ways in which they are debated” (Garrison 1981: 319). Political actors are in exceptional need of strong metaphors showing a way out of complex dilemma. The political part of public life involves the ‘translation’, the symbolic transaction, of complex problems into powerful images through metaphors. Not only is the diversity of actors and frames large, there is also a lot of ‘conceptual space’ to bridge (in the sense of stories that concern different levels of abstraction and experience e.g. from the individual to the collective, from the past to the future). This counts evidently in the communication about sensitive issues with the public, which is not waiting for complicated messages. The public demands vivid, compact language.

Political actors use metaphors to translate what is acceptable in one ‘language’ or situation to what is acceptable in another. This means that metaphors do not necessarily make the complex more understandable by simplifying. Using them is like talking another ‘language’, reframing, making an argument or an object more appealing (or the opposite), by transferring it to another domain. Metaphors themselves can be complex and ambiguous, because they are often part of one or more bigger structures of meaning, connecting some ways of thinking and opposing to others. Attributing meaning and creating symbolic structure in political practice to bridge the gap between different ways of understanding is needed to make an image for the future (thriving on stories about the past and the present). This is the way in which metaphors are not only models of reality, but also models for reality (Geertz 1993; Yanow 1992; 2000). As a consequence metaphors can prove to be ‘harder’ than the ‘facts’ that politicians use for legitimising action.

When we are studying metaphors-in-practice our biggest concern should not be the appropriateness of the metaphor in the sense of its relation to “truth”, but the power it yields in “real” situations. Metaphors can be seen as both expanding ambiguity through their multiple meanings and enabling action through their symbolic power. They “help promote conformity to organisations, movements, and leadership, though they are also central to
arousal and rebellion” (Edelman 1967: 217). In summary, metaphors in politics are used frequently because of the high amount of ‘translations’ in the arena. When they are used, they often function as legitimisation.

2. Decision making in R.

Methods
The description of the case study in this second part of the paper is the result of a six months period of research, making use of various techniques from three overall methods: interview, document analysis and observation. The research was intended to get an idea of the cultural aspects of different processes in a Dutch municipality. At the beginning of the fieldwork the importance of one explicit metaphor in one of the processes came to my attention. Actors all used this metaphor to talk about the object of study. During the fieldwork two metaphors were recurrent elements of explanations people gave me in interviews and of the storylines that were played out in public at crucial moments of the process.

The metaphors constructed since, out of metaphors-in-practice, will help to give the reader an insight into the dynamics of the issue studied and the members of the field insight in their discourse structure. The focus in this case description is not on all understanding through metaphors, but on a few metaphors that seem to structure a process. I will demonstrate how a focus on metaphors can help to understand a complex process of decision-making in local government, in which metaphors serve as a frame for both researcher and practitioner. More than generating a solution, like Schön (1993) proposes, this case study shows how different interpretations of the same metaphor can be active and how a hierarchy between metaphors can appear. In addition to that the metaphors in this case study can be used to understand political discourse in general.

A Story about a Centre
In the Dutch municipality R. the local government is preparing a decision. To make us understand the importance of this decision it can be illustrated with the following story. The municipality of R. is a nice enjoyable town, with only one big defect. It has no heart. Although the common perception is that a new centre should be created, the debate about the right location has been going on for a long time. During the 1990s the municipality was divided into two parts, the supporters of location 1 (the host of the present shopping centre) and supporters of location 2 (which currently is a sports accommodation).

Two years ago a new alderman has taken the lead in the project. He sees it as his job to temper the grand ideas of the 1990s and work towards
something that is doable. The selection process is widened from the two usual suspects to five possible locations. Not in the last place because of the debates of the nineties. As opposed to the emotions in the past, an agency from outside the city compares the five possible locations in an ‘objective’ way, so a rational choice can be made. The board of aldermen (including the mayor) reaches a decision rather easily. One of the locations (2) has a considerably better score in the agency’s ‘multi-criteria-analysis’ than the rest. Then the decision of the board has to be approved by the local council. Through adopting the language of rationality, calculation and construction building, the alderman and his colleagues (the agency, the civil servants and the other members of the board) are well aware that the metaphor most dominant in the political scene (up till then) should not be ignored. In the political arena, of which the council forms an important part, the metaphor a centre is a heart plays an important role.20

The Heart Metaphor

What is this heart metaphor? Although it sounds rather straightforward, there is more to it than appears at first glance. In R. there are two parts of the metaphor. The first part of the heart metaphor directs to the centre as more than just a new shopping centre. A pounding heart is a symbol of life. The most dominant image of being alive is the heart. Once the heart stops, a person is dead.21 The new centre should bring the community in ‘social shape’. The centre is connected to the idea of the beating of a heart. It should be the centre of activities. It should be a spot for all citizens, not just for customers. It is the ambition to make of the centre more than a place to buy things. Like one of the actors said, it should not be a place where after six you can fire a canon without anyone noticing it. The centre should be in the middle of all things. It should become ‘alive’. This connects to decision making for the centre as well to the future. It is a vision of what you want (the municipality) to be, of a centre that still has to be born. The second part of the metaphor is that the centre concerns emotions. This part of the metaphor is connected to the heart as the symbol it is most often in society. A heart is the symbol for love. A location should ‘feel good’. It should be a place were people feel at home.22 Through the heart metaphor, the idea of a centre is linked to feelings that have grown on people. It is the link to tradition, to the past. This part of the metaphor, used as an election slogan by a political party (“A heart for R.”), supports the claim that R. already has an identity that should not be lost when the new centre is build. Just like the notion of the heart (“the heart of the matter”), the notion of identity tells us that there is an essence to things.

The problem the board spots, is that various political parties are still attached to location 1, which they consider the ‘real’ centre of R. This way the
second part of the heart metaphor links not only to the past of the municipality, but also to political discussions in the past about the centre. The board invests most part of its energy in attacking location 1 and with that in the second part of the metaphor. Summarising, the two parts of the heart metaphor both have a connection to the notion of identity, but one part is directed mainly to the past and the other to the future.23

Political Debate
Location 1 has dominated the nineties. It is the location linked to the emotion. It is where the (shopping) centre is now. It is where the ‘common sense’ centre is, according many actors. This cannot be determined with measurements and calculations. The last plan, the most popular plan, was a combination of the idea of the past (the feelings attached to the location) and the future (a strong vision, ambition). It would take the current centre on location 1 into the future. Because of the defeat of the last plan (‘too expensive’), a new approach is needed. The new logic the board uses is the logic of a rational choice, taking explicit notice of the feelings that are part of the project and its past. When the board announces its decision to build on location 2, it pays lip service to both parts of the heart metaphor by adding to the decision the idea of the creation of an ‘organic’ link that should be made between the old and the new location.24

The final decision is to be taken by the council after deliberation in a commission. Long discussions are held involving the different views of the technical side of the decision. The content of the ‘multi-criteria-analysis’, that is in favour of location 2, is discussed. After the political parties have sent most part of the in total 150 mostly technical questions to the board, the discussion seems to get stuck. But then the direction of the political debate changes. All of a sudden a part of the old plan, ‘there shall be a vision’, is taken up by a political opponent of the boards decision.25 This strategy puts the board in a difficult situation. The link between location 1 and 2 is considered by some as compensation money, as a reference to former discussions and thus only to the second part of the heart metaphor. The second part of the heart metaphor (the link to the identity of the city, the link to the past) is put aside and a stress on the first part (the idea of direction towards the future and the new identity to be created) is utilised to the maximum. It is no longer a decision for the coming 20 years as the board claimed. No, this decision is one for the coming 100 years! The decision should be legitimized by the vision that speaks from it.

The detailed multi-criteria-analysis promoted by the board is redefined (and its credibility doubted) as just not more than a useful point to start a debate about the future. This future, with the enlargement of the municipality in mind, makes the construction of the centre on a third location the most
reasonable thing to do. The result of that, which took the board a long time
(convincing the political scene of the impossibility of the former plans, the
necessity to start anew without insulting the actors hanging on to location 1),
is cashed instantly by a radical approach based on the first part of the heart
metaphor. This shows that the board misjudged the present meaning of the
heart metaphor. The political parties had more problems with the location 2
(because they thought that would become a ‘dead’ centre) than that they were
still attached to (in love with) location 1. Using the heart metaphor the way
the board did mostly diminished the power of their argument, because of the
different possible meanings of the notion. The ambiguity that was raises did
not work in their benefit. Ultimately the plan of the board overcomes, but not
without using the strength of a second metaphor.

A Story about a Local Government
In the first story the problem with which local government is faced, is one of
choice. The local governmental actors are not able to decide where the centre
should be. There is a second story at work: The local government has been busy
for ages to build a centre in R. Up till now no plan materialized. The public is
disappointed in local government and has started to judge local government in terms
its performance in the centre issue. If you want to know local government, look at the
centre. History has shown that the local government of R. is not capable of making
decisions.

This story does not focus on the centre, but on the local government as
a decision-making organisation. The problem is not where the centre should
be constructed. The problem is that the local authorities of R. are not able to
make decisions. Local government as a whole is evaluated by its inability to
build a centre. The following metaphor (technically also referred to as
metonymy or synecdoche) is at work: local government is (like) the planning of
the centre.26

The Centre Metaphor
At the moment the decision is to be made, some political actors show that the
centre metaphor is playing an important role for them.27 Not the content of
the decision (where to build a centre) but the act of taking a decision is crucial.
These politicians are worried about the, according to them, catastrophic
situation that might appear if they do not support the board. We have to
decide, they seem to say, to make of the centre metaphor a positive one. We
have to show some problem solving capacity.

At the final decision making stage this metaphor (local government is
like the planning of the centre) takes over the scene, in the sense that the
majority of the members of the council chooses to follow the board, although
most of the members are not totally convinced that the choice will be the best
support for the first part of the first metaphor (the centre should be a heart).
The centre metaphor can be seen as part of the approach the board is taking, including a ‘new’ way of decision making: a set of rational choices to finally solve the problem. Although the ‘scientific’ report (the multi-criteria-analysis) looses its centrality and credibility, not all actors sceptical of the board’s decision are able to free themselves of (or ignore) the institutional engagements that are part of their stories.

Once the board uses its ultimate power and threatens implicitly to resign if the council does not in majority support their proposal (thereby making the continuance of the project problematic) these actors see themselves forced to support the board. A hierarchy can be discovered in which the content in the policy is subordinated to local government as such. The idea of a vision (a notion directed to the far future) is overcome by an action (a notion of the near present). This is part of a certain mode of reasoning, a certain frame. Decision makers should not sit around thinking about the perfect plan. Local government should do what can be done, if it cannot do what should be done.

Silence in the Debate
When we contemplate the second story there is one part that remains vague: whether the ‘general’ public still wants a centre. Although different actors suggested in interviews that the general public does not want a centre anymore, this question the story raises gets almost no attention in the political arena. No structural attempt is made to ask citizens for their opinion. All but one political party have now or in the past invested heavily in the project and letting go would thereby inflict considerable damage on their public image.

The discussion about the location through the notion of the hearth helps to divert the attention from the necessity of the centre in general. Accepting the notion of a heart substitutes the question of public support for one of the locations. Because how could anyone protest against the noble ambition to create a heart of all? Even when a visiting professor asks the political actors the question whether the municipality needs a centre, they do not want to discuss this question. It seems inappropriate to the politicians, because they interpret the centre as an essential sign of identity of their municipality.

If we consider the two stories that can be told about the decision making, the forgotten part of the second story is quite relevant. One could question whether it is possible to create a heart in the sense of a place people are emotionally attached to if you do not have the support of these people. The first meaning of a heart (more than shops), one could argue, leads to a blueprint (model for) but does not necessarily lead to the common perception of ‘a heart’ (model of reality). Eventually the notion of the heart as an image of (emotional) reality lies further in the future than the blueprint. When a new centre (‘more than shops’) is built with a heart as a model, the question
whether people define it as a heart once it is built is still to be questioned because a new centre has not yet a past to reflect on! The structure may be laid out, but the ultimate use (definition) is not done in the planning department. The idea of the rivalry between (the supporters) of location 1 and of location 2 becomes trivial if that fight shows to be located solely in local government itself. The idea of a local government that takes decisions instead of ‘endlessly discussing’ becomes problematic if nobody is interested in the result.

3. The Role of Metaphors in…

A Political Decision Making Process
The case description you just read leads us to the question how metaphors-in-practice play a role in political decision-making? Let us start with what we could learn from the heart metaphor.31 The notion sounds unproblematic: The municipality has no heart. This is the model of reality. It seems the most compact and therefore the most powerful way to describe the current situation in R. Because of the unanimity (in local government) the metaphor also becomes a model for reality. A heart should be created; it is the norm for every self-respecting municipality. The long debate and the inability to realize the centre emphasized a second meaning of the metaphor.32 The heart in this way redirects the actors to the past. In the context the political arena of R. that means not just the love for a centre but also emotions in the debate and the love for the last plan.

Because the proposal of the board uses both parts of the heart metaphor, it creates an ambiguous image. The second part is a definition of the solution, the first on of the problem.33 This way the metaphor looses its future directed generative function. It no longer reduces complexity by making a legitimate image. The political opposition revives the technical debate that seemed to run into a deadlock, because it recycles the heart metaphor, leaving the second part ‘behind’.

The past of the project in R. has also created a centre metaphor. The governmental actors have the idea that the general public will judge local government only from their knowledge of the centre. The most visible aspect of the local government fills up the image of the local government itself. The board needs this second metaphor to ‘break’ the opposition. Taking the ‘best’ decision becomes subordinate to making a decision that safeguards the future action of building a centre (and even the future of the municipality). An important reference is made to the past of the process.34 The argument is that trying to create the perfect centre only has gotten the municipality into trouble. A proof of problem solving capacity is needed to show the public
local government is still ‘alive’. The political actors supporting the board obey
the common sense expression “action speaks louder than words”. They feel
the need to finish the ‘never-ending story’.35

The relation between the centre project and the local government can be seen
in a similar way as the relation between the heart and the municipality. Both
problems are interpreted as major problems at the core of things. Actors use
the metaphors to reduce and reframe complexity by claiming to have found
the essence. Nevertheless the heart metaphor shows that containing
complexity might at a certain moment result in the reverse if a metaphor
directs different ways at once.

Summarising the role of the metaphors, the heart metaphor served to
legitimise of the building of a centre in general. The centre metaphor forced
actors to choose the side of the board.36 At least two alternative policy options
were cut off in the process. In the first place there was no attention for the
idea that the public perhaps would not want a centre (anymore). In the
second place the idea to build on a third location did not overcome because
council members obeyed the logic of the centre metaphor.

Politics in General
The observations in the last paragraph can be seen as a point of departure to
discuss role of metaphors in the political arena in general. At a more abstract
level one could argue that the two metaphors in this paper show some
important aspects of political life. The popularity of the first metaphor can be
understood if we see politicians as actors that think they have to contribute to
the identity of the community they live in. They cannot just build a shopping
centre. They have to create a heart! The metaphor forms part of a story that
has a happy end for everybody.

The second metaphor has to do with the doubts they have about
whether they are legitimised to take decisions in general if they cannot show
some result. The metaphor describes the fear of performing Sisyfus’ myth.
This metaphor shows that image management is perceived as an important
aspect of political life.37 Actors anticipate the idea that one element can
contaminate the image of a whole system. All together, the force of strong
metaphors structures the political debate.

In both cases of metaphor the actors do not just create a world in which
symbols refer to spaces and projects refer to organisations, they do so in
anticipation of their partly imaginary public. They act along the line of public
stories they invented themselves. Some parts of the possible stories are useful
to political actors at a certain moment in time, while other ones should be
hidden. Political actors have a central role in these stories. They have a claim
to make about the essence of what’s to be done. They, to some extent, seem to
believe they are (or should still be) at the ‘heart’ of politics.
Two points about metaphors in politics should be repeated here. First of all, Edelman's (1967) early lessons are still relevant: Politics are to a large extent symbolic and metaphors are used to legitimize decisions that actors take. Metaphors, in that sense, are not only ways of understanding one thing in terms of another, but also the ‘right’ (most powerful) way of talking and understanding within a certain arena. Political statements are another interesting example of this. The formulation of these statements often involves different viewpoints brought together in ambiguous phrasing, leaving like metaphors much to the fantasy of the listener.

But there is more. Metaphors do not just form part of alternative stories. The study of metaphors shows that the ambiguity of political metaphors can lay in the multiple meanings people ascribe to the same metaphor (see also Yanow 1992). Metaphors, initiated at a certain moment for a certain goal, can create new meanings through the way they fit into alternative stories. Although these new meanings are bound to their shared context, metaphors can create new realities. The same metaphor can be at the ‘heart’ of different and possibly conflicting stories or frames. The result of these two characteristics of metaphors is that politicians are guided by a ‘play of metaphors’ (Alvesson 1993) they cannot control.38

At the end of this paper a statement should be made about the value of studying metaphors in political science. The conclusion should be that ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz 1993) of metaphors, showing different meanings that are attributed to them in a context and how they guide and legitimize political action, will give political scientists insight in the way politics will get caught in metaphors over and over again.


The concept of metaphor applied in the case study is a broad one: “From metaphor, or ways of seeing things as if they were something else, flow related tropes” (Manning 1979: 661). It therefore includes metonymy. “The part stands for the whole” as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: chapter 8) describe it. Others refer to this relation between two concepts as synecdoche (e.g. Stone 2002: 145-148). Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 264-267) themselves recently reviewed their
opinion on difference between metaphor and metonymy, but in this paper I will not go into
the difference and treat them both as metaphorical thinking.
2 The argument that we could better do without metaphors loses part of its sense when we
accept that metaphors are necessary for the production of meaning. They are as much the
source of destruction (of old structures of meaning), as they are the source of creation.
3 Edelmanns article (Edelman 1967) appeared later as part of his Politics as Symbolic Action
(Edelman 1971).
4 With action I mean action in the future, whereas models of reality has to do with the
organisation of past experience.
5 As Rein and Schön (1977: 242) note “it is not uncommon to find that insight into the
metaphor that integrates our understanding comes only at the end of our inquiry, rather than
at the beginning.”
6 By metaphorical understanding I mean the using metaphors, thus the daily analysis though
metaphor. The analysis of metaphorical understanding is the study of the way metaphors are
used. This is of course also largely a metaphorical exercise.
7 In that case science is the field.
8 A long list of terms could be made, including discourse(coalitions) and story-lines (Hajer
1989; 1993), frames (Rein and Schö 1977) etc. These are used by a variety of social scientists,
often in combination. The school formed in political science and inspired by the work of Mary
Douglas called Cultural Theory (Thomson et al. 1990) is an interesting alternative because it
claims that the world can be divided into four (or five) ‘ways of life’, supported by four
myths of nature (a sort of big metaphors). Nevertheless this approach conflicts with the more
interpretative manner of understanding the field (Yanow 1996: 56; 2000: 83).
9 This argument was already part of Manning’s (1979) article on metaphors.
10 I myself as a researcher use a culture metaphor to understand the practices in local
government. Just as metaphors culture can be seen as both a culture as a model of and for
reality (Geertz 1993: 93). It is a map and an instruction device at the same time (De Ruijter
2000). As Czarniawska-Joerges (1991, 285) stated, a cultural frame of analysis (like every other
frame) “helps to reveal and focus certain phenomena by neglecting an covering others”.
Culture is used as a metaphor for the whole of the local municipal arena, in analogy to
Smircich’s (1983) distinction between “an organization has a culture” versus “an organization
is a culture”. The study of metaphors and phenomena alike would in my opinion make the
use of the noun ‘culture’ not strictly necessary (Smircich and Calás 1987)
11 The attention of the researcher is now not on the question the legitimisation of the
metaphor but on the thing (e.g. policy) legitimisation is sought for.
12 This is not to say that this only counts for the study of politics. Nevertheless my claim
would be that in the study of politics the approach to metaphors should always keep
metaphors as tool for legitimisation as one of their main results.
13 Compactness and vividness are two of the three (the third one being the ability to express
the ‘unnameable’) qualities Ortony (1975) attributed to metaphors.
14 The most interesting metaphors are the ones that form part of a bigger spectre of meaning,
and are part of what you could call a system (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and not the “one-shot
metaphor”(Lakoff 1987).
15 The ground of the relation to reality is in big part covered by Miller (1979).
16 The “they” Edelman refers to are metaphors and myths.
17 To be precise I conducted over 40 open and the conversational interviews, document
analysis (almost literal reports of council meetings and a variety of administrative and
political products) and observation of large amount of political and administrative meetings,
both the ones accessible to the general public and the ones that are not.
In a way similar to what Yanow (1996: 42-48) describes. The metaphors were not concretely on my ‘list’ when I entered the field and ideas developed when data from the field, simultaneous reflection and literature reading came together.

An earlier (dutch) version of the case study description was discussed with 12 actors in the field.

Most actors in the local government at large used the connotation to talk about the municipality in interviews. They see it as the main characteristic of the municipality. It was also used in policy documents and as a slogan (by a local political party). Centre itself is a metaphor (helping to decide something about the spot where it should be). In the discussion you can see that the idea that it should be in the centre, in the middle, plays a part. But on the other hand the notion of a heart perhaps has a stronger link to a certain spot, if we think of shopping centres built at the border of municipalities.

Ipso facto a person without a heart was never alive.

The metaphor of the centre as the living room of the city approaches this idea as well.

The first notion resembles more a model for reality, the creation of a hearth being the right course of action, in the absence of a heart. The second notion could be interpreted as a model of reality, the centre is already there. We just have to make it look more like a heart. This idea was elaborated on by Yanow (1992; 2000), who borrowed it from Geertz (1993, 93). I would consider the second part to be a relatively local part of the metaphor because of the history of the debate and the first a more common one, appearing in a lot of policy documents concerning the building of centres.

In convincing the general public that a new centre is needed the alderman already used the metaphor of a dying centre, referring to the shops that were closed in the last years.

The image of a vision is dominant because it links to the politician as somebody ahead of his or her community, a leader. It is super-rationality. Putting vision in the middle links to the metaphor of the political as a debate. In a debate it is not the concrete proof, which is the ultimate source of power, but the persuasiveness of a more abstract vision (which should have some reference to concrete fulfilment though). This vision must replace the old vision for location 1, now most actors have realized that building on that location has come to a ‘dead end’. The moment the vision is put forward by one of the council members coincides with the increasing pressure the board puts on the coalition parties. The board asks loyalty to the members of the coalition. That makes the political actors reflect on their own identity. Who is to decide where the centre should be? In the heart (third possible use of the heart metaphor, now definitely more as a tool of the researcher!) of the debate the council wants to see itself, as the representation of the city. The success of the vision complies with the dominant metaphor a centre is a heart, especially if we understand that the political actors have come to stress the second and perhaps the third connection between the heart, the centre and a decision. That’s why the decision making process drifts away from the proposal of the board, to the vision put forward by (a member of) the council itself.

A difference between the centre metaphor and the heart metaphor is that the heart metaphor is used in a more literally sense (at sentence level), whereas the centre metaphor was manifested itself more in the context of a story.

References are made to the “crisis” the government went through the year before, the important developments in the region and the possible threat of amalgamation.

Before the decision for the location was made a decision was made on the ‘volume’ of the centre, instead of the other way around. The rhetoric of a ‘new’ approach is used to promote the idea this time everything is different and therefore to take distance from the unsuccessful past.

The only party that was not part of any plan or board is in fact the only party that brings up the idea of the public not wanting a centre at all.
Neither is the public asked for their preference for one of the locations, although this was part of the multi-criteria-analysis. The public support for one of the locations was later formulated as the absence of strong objection against location 2. Possible indifference of the public as a reason for not showing up at political meetings was interpreted as probable satisfaction.

The heart metaphor connects partly to the social-political metaphor of the community as an organism. Of course this notion is quite similar to the organism metaphors used to describe organisations and societies.

The two distinct meanings of a heart (love and life) can be seen as second-level metaphors (Alvesson 1993). When different second level metaphors govern the same first level metaphor, this can be called ‘metaphorical drifting’. Especially words with a strong metaphorical meaning are capable of doing that.

Emotion has a negative connotation in politics, life a positive.

It is interesting that just like the different timeframes that the politicians use to talk about the future of the centre, there are also different ways to talk about the past. Whereas the people that stress the importance of taking a decision might talk about 25 years of debate, other people claim that most of the debate only took place during the last decade.

It can also be typified as Stone (2002: 146-147) calls parts that dominate the image of wholes in a negative way: the ‘horror story’.

Heart metaphor was out in the open, but unexamined in the way done in this paper. The constant repetition of the metaphor in interviews ‘forced’ the researcher to investigate it further. The centre metaphor worked indirectly; because it is based on the knowledge the actors have about the thinking of the public and about themselves. It is based on the idea that the local government got itself locked in by the image of its own incapacity to solve a major problem. Not solving the problem became a problem itself.

As Yanow (2000, 43) stated for policy science: “Uncovering the metaphoric roots of policy or agency language and acts is one way of discovering the architecture of the policy argument.”

The notion of games as a model for organisational action is the main example used by Alvesson (1993).