Metaphors in sexual politics

Constituting problems in terms of slippery slopes

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If understanding is a journey, then my travel in metaphors has merely begun. I originally hoped to get onto an early-morning flight directly to the destination of this paper, but ended up trying to get there by the more time-consuming rusty roads. My motorcycle has broken down several times, and I welcome all suggestions to fix it and to improve its speed.
Metaphors are important elements in political struggles, because they are linguistic and cognitive devices which set the scene: What is the issue about and what is it not about, how does it link to other issues, and why must we therefore deal with it in a certain way.

This paper addresses the role of slippery slope metaphors in 20th century Norwegian sexual and reproductive politics. Metaphor will here be used as an analytic concept for something represented through something else (the 'else' part is problematic, since there will often be disagreement about to what extent conceptual domains are distinct). Through the slippery slope metaphor, a present instant case is linked to a hypothetical, future danger case, so that the negative aspects of the danger case spills over onto the instant case. At the same time, this metaphor frames politics as a world of physical objects, where laws of physics rule instead of more complex and unpredictable social factors – e.g. human inconsistencies and political contingencies.

The analysis of the slippery slope metaphor’s role in sexual politics is related to two specific theoretical traditions on language: That of Lakoff and Johnson, and that of Fairclough, van Dijk and Wodak (Critical Discourse Analysis). Both these traditions have roots in linguistics, but are very different when it comes to the role they ascribe to metaphors: As something 'we live by,' central to language and thought (Lakoff and Johnson), and as rhetorical figures which serve to represent the world in an ideological way (CDA).

The slippery slope metaphor

In an article on British media debate in 2000 around the birth of the first so-called designer baby, the slippery slope metaphor is discussed as one example of the more generic category *threshold metaphors*, also including crossing a line, taking one step too far and opening Pandora’s Box. The essence of the slippery slope 'argumentative cliché', as Nerlich *et al.* (2003) spells it out, is that the endpoint of the slippery slope (in their case, the prospect of ‘designer babies’) semantically contaminates the top of it (the concept and practice of 'donor babies').
The structure of the slippery slope metaphor type of argument\(^1\) has been more formally mapped out by Schauer (1985, p.369). He sets up a useful threefold conceptual distinction between the *state of rest* (the current state of affairs), the *instant case* (the problem now before us and its proposed resolution), and the *danger case* (the feared future problem that could result from the instant case). The slippery slope argument says that by moving from the state of rest to the instant case, there will be nothing that can stop us from ending up at the danger case:

A slippery slope argument claims that permitting the instant case – a case that it concedes to be facially innocuous and that it linguistically distinguishes from the danger case – will nevertheless lead to, or increase the likelihood of, the danger case.

Stepping from the state of rest to the seemingly harmless instant case is in other words like stepping from solid ground onto a slippery slope, where the danger case lies at the bottom end.

The slippery slope metaphor works metaphorically in two distinguishable ways. Firstly, it brings the physical world of moving objects in as an analogy in political matters, implying that politics is like the physical world: If you make a specific move in the world of politics, like making or changing a particular law or policy, other things will follow as a matter of fact – just as if you put a physical object on a sliding plate. This picture downplays the enormous complexity of cause and effect in the social world of politics compared to that of the natural world of gravity and laws of physics.

Secondly, the slippery slope is in itself a particular concrete image that involves something going from somewhere to somewhere else: From a good/relatively good place to a bad place, from a political world of voluntarism and human action to natural world of determinism and laws of physics. It contemplates a kind of unidirectional, unstoppable movement which, when used metaphorically about politics, binds phenomena together in a specific way, thus having a constitutive effect on the matter in question.

The political instant case is thus subject to a metaphorical transfer of meaning in two ways; by the analogy of physical laws of cause and effect (the instant case will automatically and

\(^1\) Schauer writes that several other expressions are used to refer to the same phenomenon, including 'the camel’s nose is in the tent’, ‘the thin edge of the wedge’, and ‘a foot in the door’.
necessarily lead to the danger case), and by the idea of one-way movement arising from the image of the slippery slope itself.

As Schauer points out, the argument built on the slippery slope metaphor favours the status quo (the state of rest) rather than change (moving on to the instant case, and therefore, eventually, to the danger case). In this sense, the slippery slope metaphor has a clear conservative bias, if we by conservative mean an embracement of existing policies and laws and a reluctant attitude to trying something new – which, in this logic of thinking, could turn out to have irrevocably dangerous effects despite its apparent innocence.

**The slippery slope metaphor in Norwegian sexual politics**

The examples given in this section are taken from my doctoral thesis work on argumentation in Norwegian parliamentary debates on sexuality and reproduction during the second half of the 20th century (Stenvoll 2003). The thesis covered debates on the following issues: Abortion, human biotechnology, homosexuality, prostitution, and depictions of pornography and/or violence. All major and some minor legislative debates on these issues during the period were analysed, and types of arguments cross-cutting the issued and the time dimension were classified and mapped out.2

The slippery slope metaphor, or similar expressions implying a disastrous downwards movement from the instant case towards the danger case, were raised on a number of occasions. In the following I will give a few examples of how the metaphor came out in different controversies.

In a number of abortion debates, slippery slope logic was put forth. It was argued that to allow abortion at all, or in other cases than ‘self-defence’ (when continued pregnancy could threaten woman’s life or health), would lead to a slide towards infanticide or euthanasia (one MP, during a mid-1970s debate, also mentioned ‘sexual irresponsibility’ as the possible end point). Another version claimed that it would lead to abortion used ‘as contraception’ – that is, instead of using pre-conceptive means for birth control. This last argument was also used

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2 See Stone (1997) for a similar type of analysis.
against the introduction of RU-486 as abortion method in hospitals, which, it was argued, would lead to it being used outside of hospitals, and eventually as contraception.

New reproductive techniques and prenatal screening were two other issues where the instant cases (e.g. freezing of fertilized eggs, egg donation and allowing screening for serious disabilities) would lead to the danger cases (e.g. cloning, surrogate motherhood and screening for less serious disabilities or even normal traits, like sex). In Nerlich et al.’s (2003) article on designer babies, the end of the slippery slope is some version of eugenics, where technology is abused to improve the human species or to use humans as means rather than to treat them as ends in themselves. This image has been present in other bio-political debates as well (Walton 1992, McGleenan 1995).

During the early 1980s, when pornography laws were discussed (the political thrust, grounded in radical feminism coupled to puritanism, was to make them stricter), the consumption of porn was compared to the consumption of drugs: Seeing ‘half porn’ would lead to the demand for harder stuff. When confronted with demands for freedom of speech, it was easier to argue for the criminalisation of indecent images and porn through reference to the presumed slide towards the harder stuff (involving violence, animals, children, dead bodies, etc.).

In sexuality debates from the mid-1950s and early 1960s, it was moreover warned that to decriminalise living as concubines, male homosexuality, and refusal to marry a woman one has made pregnant under promise of marriage, could lead to a ‘moral backslide’. These were old paragraphs which were rarely or never used in practice, and the resistance to nullify them (the instant case) can be understood in terms of increased risk for an accelerated moral decay (the danger case).

For the purpose of this analysis of slippery slope metaphors, I don't require Schauer's defining characteristic of the instant case as necessarily being harmless or uncontroversial. This might be the situation in some instances, but in other situations there will be some, e.g. those arguing in terms of the slippery slope metaphor, who also oppose to the instant case in it self.

For instance, when parliament debated the same-sex partnership law in the early 1990s, many MPs were against 'gay marriage' (the instant case) for allegedly representing a threat to the institution of marriage. This was a self-contained argument, grounded in a normative defence of heterosexual marriage, against the proposed legislation. During the debates, however, an
additional opponent's argument was put forth, one of 'now marriage, next adoption'. It was claimed that if we allow gay people to marry (the instant case), something that might not in itself be so bad (since, after all, the majority of MPs are in favour of it), then something we all (or the large majority of us) are against, gay couples adopting children (the danger case), will necessarily follow. In this example, gay marriage is by some seen as an evil in itself, but also as the top of a slippery slope towards something even worse.

Arguing both in terms of the slippery slope and against the instant case as such might be seen as inconsistent if judged by Schauer's defining characteristics, but it should come as no surprise that such inconsistencies exist in practical politics. The camel's nose might be in the tent, but one can still bet on several horses at once. Arguments using the slippery slope metaphor will in general have a greater potential for support than arguments against the instant case. In many contexts, the slippery slope argument will not be the only objection to a suggested policy or legislation, but an argument which will co-exist with other arguments.

In addition to the given examples, I’ve found the following expressions for slippery slope logic in the studied debates: Be on slippery ground, stand at the edge of the precipice, the domino effect (surprisingly, the Norwegian climate considered, I have not found instances of the equivalent concept of snowballing), a quagmire, a sliding scale, downhill, backslide, pitfall, and the last bulwark. Except from the last one, all these metaphorical expressions imply the high possibility or necessity of (further) downwards movement – into a bad or disastrous situation. The last bulwark metaphor has a somewhat different focus than the others: There is an external enemy whose invasion will be prevented by remaining at the state of rest. The other expressions rather imply that the enemy is within and that the instant case will release those destructive energies and take us to the danger case.

**Arguing against the slippery slope metaphor**

None of those in favour of same-sex partnership in fact refuted the 'marriage to adoption' slippery slope argument by speaking in favour of 'the danger case' – allowing same-sex couples to be assessed as adoptive parents (eight years later, new legislation allowing for adoption of step-children within same-sex partnerships was passed, and the current debate seems to point towards a general right to be assessed as adoptive parents regardless of civil status). Instead, it was suggested that the overarching principle guiding children's rights, 'the
best of the child principle', would be a threshold against adoption by gay couples. In a more
generic term, this counter-argument can be referred to as a 'foothold' metaphor. There is a
foothold, a line, a hedge or a bulwark which will prevent the slide. On the abortion isse, the
medical committee regime was presented as a barrier against abortion turning into a
conventional method of birth control. On the issue of freezing fertilized eggs, a maximum
time limit was presented as the guarantee against the worst science fiction scenarios.

Foothold metaphors do not challenge the normative content of slippery slope metaphors as
such (that the danger case is indeed dangerous and that it could result from accepting the
instant case), but rather its presumed determinism (that there is nothing to prevent the danger
case developing from the instant case).

McGleenan (1995) has similarly pointed out how, in many countries’ policies of human gene
therapy, a line has been drawn between changing somatic cells (only affecting the treated
individual) and germ cells (potentially affecting all future offspring). Restricting gene therapy
to somatic cells would, allegedly, be the 'bright line' preventing us from sliding down the
slippery slope. This is another example of arguments countering the slippery slope logic, but
not its normative content.

Lakoff and Johnson on metaphor
In the theory of Lakoff and Johnson (hereafter L&J), language, and in particular metaphor,
has a profound position. Metaphors are not just rhetorical devices (as in CDA, see below), but
‘pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.’ (L&J 1980, p.3).
They are central to our conceptual systems, that is, to how categories are understood, defined,
and linked to other categories.

L&J defines the essence of metaphor as understanding one thing/domain of experience in
terms of another thing/domain of experience. This involves both highlighting and hiding: By
focusing on one aspect of something, another is downplayed or hidden. For instance,
describing an argument in terms of a battle, thus metaphorically connecting arguing to
warfare (where there is a winner and a loser), hides the cooperative functions of argument
(where both can be winners, e.g. through a consensus which both parts will benefit from).
Through the process of metaphorical categorisation, things are given meaning through such highlighting, downplaying and hiding.

A central idea in L&J is that metaphorical structuring has a certain direction: Relatively more abstract and experience-distant concepts and domains of experience are understood in terms of relatively more concrete and experience-near concepts and domains of experience. The fact that we are physical beings, moving in a physical and social world where we interact with objects and other physical beings, affects our understanding of the world. For instance, gravity’s effect on our bodies is a basic experience that structures the way we perceive of things as ordered vertically. Meaning and what we consider to be truths are thus embodied, in the sense that they arise from our bodily experiences in interacting with our environment. L&J call this view of language ‘experientialism’, which is contrasted to and presented as a synthesis of ‘objectivism’ and ‘subjectivism’:

‘We reject the objectivist view that there is absolute and unconditional truth without adopting the subjectivist alternative of truth as obtainable only through the imagination, unconstrained by external circumstances. The reason we have focused so much on metaphor is that it unites reason and imagination. Reason, at the very least, involves categorization, entailment, and inference. Imagination, in one of its many aspects, involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing – what we have called metaphorical thought. Metaphor is thus imaginative rationality.’ (L&J 1980, p.192-193).

When we apply this ‘imaginative rationalist’ understanding of metaphor to politics, we can say that rather than being something external to politics, a rhetorical language instrument which political actors can (ab)use to promote their interests, metaphor is essential in constituting politics itself. Metaphor plays a major role in how we understand political concepts and actors, social phenomena, chains of causality, etc.

L&J make a distinction between new metaphors, which bind together kinds of things in an original and non-conventional way, and conventional metaphors, which are so entrenched in everyday language use that most people don’t think of them as metaphors at all. Conventional metaphors are furthermore classified into three types: Structural metaphors (one concept is structured in terms of another, e.g. ‘linguistic expressions are containers for meaning’), orientational metaphors (a system of concepts are organised with respect to one another, e.g. ‘health and life are up; sickness and death are down’), and ontological metaphors (abstract phenomena are treated as physical objects, e.g. ‘the mind is a machine; the mind is a brittle object’).
These types correspond to different dimensions of the slippery slope metaphor, as discussed above. Firstly, the concept of a slippery slope serves to structure the political domain in terms of the physical domain. Secondly, it organises political strategies hierarchically, where the ‘top’ is good, a place we should try to remain or strive to get to, and the ‘bottom’ is bad, a place we should and must stay away from. The downward movement corresponds to L&J's orientational metaphor that good is up and bad is down, since going down the slippery slope always signifies going to a less pleasant place. And thirdly, it represents abstract and complex social phenomena, like a policy or a legal practice, as clearly distinguishable physical objects. Thus, the slippery slope metaphor is very much a metaphor ‘we live by’ in a L&J sense, since it structures, on several levels, the way some of us understand, experience and practice politics.

In L&J terms, the 'politics to physics' function of the slippery slope metaphor is, thus, of a conceptual kind: Something relatively abstract (politics and social objects) is seen in terms of something relatively concrete (nature and physical objects). The relatively abstract and unpredictable effects of political actions, such as a new law or a changed policy, are understood in terms of the more predictable effects of stepping onto a slippery slope: You will, no doubt about it, slide down to the end of the slope.

**Metaphor in Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) is a tradition that can be tied to the journal Discourse & Society, which started in 1990. The tradition’s most prominent theorists are Teun A. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, which all have a background in linguistics. In an early issue of Discourse & Society, van Dijk accounts for two central ideas behind the journal which also captures the essence of CDA: Firstly, to bring more focus to socio-political relations in linguistic and social psychological studies of language, because these disciplines are too concerned with technical aspects of language and with individual language use out of context. And secondly, to encourage more empirical text analysis within social scientific discourse analysis, which in van Dijk’s expressed view is often too abstract and detached from concrete text.
A central idea behind CDA is, thus, to bring empirical and theoretical work together, and to develop a specific methodology for critical studies of language (this aim somewhat mirrors the expressed aspirations for this metaphor workshop). Van Dijk (1994) argues that social scientists have to take text analysis more seriously, and that it is not sufficient to just ‘juggle’ concepts such as text and discourse. Rather, he writes, one must systematically examine ‘their detailed phonological, graphical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, lexical, rhetorical, interactional or cognitive structures and strategies.’ He furthermore asserts that ‘vague and metaphorical terminology is no substitute for such explicit analyses’, and that post-structuralist writing ‘too often indulges in pre-structuralist impressionism’.

Within the CDA tradition, as in Marxist theorising, language does not have independent explanatory power. Language, including metaphor, is seen as an instrument of politics, as something that political actors ‘stand outside’ (to use a conventional metaphor) and can use to communicate, legitimate and/or mask political interests. In the first issue of Discourse & Society, van Dijk (1990) writes about how power abuse and inequalities can be expressed and legitimised through rhetoric and persuasive argumentation, and through controlling semantic content. ‘Manufacture of consent’, ‘monitoring of the mind’ and ‘mind management’ take place through language. In this theoretical universe, the role of metaphor is that of a rhetorical figure which functions to represent the world in an ideological way. The critical part of CDA resides in an ideal of researching and solving societal problems connected to inequalities.

Norman Fairclough (1992, p. 75-77), who has been particularly concerned with working out a practical methodology for CDA, suggests an analytical division of discourse analysis into three parts, the latter containing the former: Discourse as text, as discursive practice (the production, distribution and consumption of text), and as social practice (power and ideology aspects of text and discursive practices). He furthermore suggests that text analysis can be organised under the following four headings: Vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure. Metaphor is to be focused as part of the vocabulary, that is, how individual words have specific political and ideological significance. Van Dijk (1993) makes a similar distinction between analysis of context (such as access patterns, setting, and participant positions and roles) and analysis of the text itself (such as its topics, style and rhetoric – including metaphor).
Thus, in CDA methodology, consideration of metaphor is seen as part of a critical, ideology-revealing analysis of a text’s rhetorical figures. Metaphor is something to be considered at the most text-near of the analysis, subject to further interpretation and contextualisation at the next levels of discursive and social practices.

**Discussion**

The metaphor of the slippery slope sets the scene of a political theatre in which the actors slide helplessly across the tilting floor. In this tragic drama, a seemingly innocent Act leads to a sequence of scenes which was never in the original script.

The two theoretical tradition considered in this paper treat metaphor very differently. In the political theatre of L&J, metaphors are given lead roles and are crucial in making the performance understandable and enjoyable to the audience. In the political circus of CDA, however, metaphors are merely linguistic requisites used by the clowns, the acrobats and the circus director to entertain and spellbind the audience, while a powerful few enjoy the real entertainment – the tragedy of the oppressed – in a more exclusive showing elsewhere.

The ‘highlighting and hiding’ function of metaphor, accounted for both by L&J and in CDA, is part of the broader phenomenon of selective problematisation in political debate. Different problematisations of an issue, through metaphors, narratives, analogies, myths, or choice of words, highlight some problems and downplays others. Sometimes this can be done consciously and strategically, thus serving rhetorical functions, and at other times it can happen because political actors just portray the world ‘as they see it’ – in other words, a given problematisation can be part of their doxa – their unquestioned beliefs.

As for the slippery slope metaphor, it seems like an impossible task to decide whether those who use it really believe in it (as one might expect on the basis of a L&J understanding of metaphor as constitutive) or just use it rhetorically because there is a greater argumentative catch-all potential in arguing against the danger case rather than the instant case. It seems intuitive to believe that there will always be some mix of these two, although not necessarily split along the clear-cut line implied in CDA (with those in power using metaphors rhetorically and the rest believing in them). The intentions of the speaker might not even matter so much for how we approach metaphor (or language in general) methodologically
within political science. It does in any case not matter much for the purpose of my analysis. What I see as important, is to point critically to the ways in which a given political vocabulary and set of arguments structure the matter at hand. Which alternative problematisations are hidden or downplayed by a dominant one, and what effects would a different way of conceptualising the problem have on the political process? Would, for instance, a different set of metaphors, narratives and vocabulary change the kind of expertise which are given weight, and which political solutions to the problem seem intelligent, effective and legitimate?

Both the discussed approaches to metaphor have their weaknesses. CDA is, in my view, seems to let the focus on powerful and oppressed social groups guide the analysis too much, thus reducing language to merely a set of tools. The main purpose of the analysis becomes to show how ‘the powerful’ abuse language, including metaphor, to keep the others in place, and to set up alternative and more socially just linguistic expressions of reality. This downplays the seemingly complex relationship between language and reality (and power), which is better accounted for by L&J. They, on the other hand, seem to overdo the coherence and naturalness of our conceptual system, by linking conventional metaphors to the presumed universal experience of being a human in the physical world.
References


