For a metaphorical tool to evoke identity: the tomen

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Abstract

In my contribution I want to investigate, from a theoretical point of view but also with methodological and practical consequences, the qualitative role of metaphor in social research. As tool able to improve and facilitate the visualization of complex ideas and states of mind, this rhetorical figure permits to obtain more information from interviewed people about topics hard to access in common interviews. This goal can be achieved by the build of the so called "tomen", an artifact/experience design created by the subject(s) interviewed which represents a gate point from which explore hidden dimensions, individual as diffused. Furthermore, the metaphor offers a strong link to another concept that now in sociology needs an operative dimension, the game: a buzz word that I intend as social frame of experience positioned in an artificial setting, a "magic circle", able to represent in its operations a collective metaphor which gives us enormous possibilities to configure and set the ground of analysis.

Keywords: metaphor, social research, qualitative methods, game, tomen

Introduction

The qualitative interview is an important way to discover the narration of the self. As suggested by Silverman (2004), according to Byrne, it is the main method to explore identity because it fix access gates into people's opinions and visions, through a strong interaction with the researcher. Also Ferrarotti (2011) intends it as a bidirectional, empathic process. If we choose the constructive approach, we intend interview as a creative moment, where researcher and people build the social meaning together, making it at the moment using their cultural tools of stories, schemata and cognitive models. Soft culture's approaches find in this method the best way to concretize their results and aspirations, permitting structured analysis of the subjectivity. There isn't the claim to find anything totally objective, but the aim to register something in its developing, also causing it: the personal story and the cultural articulations are assembled in the time of interaction between interviewer and interviewed; of course not from a tabula rasa, but starting with memories, practical consciousness and scripts (etc.) contained in their "social luggage".

During the linearization of the person report, usually it emerges a center, a sort of gravity point. For Ricoeur (1990) we are talking about the so called narrative identity; in Cultural Studies approach the language works as representation tool able to give unity to subject in an individual genealogy (Hall, 1997). However, as observed by Couldry

(2003) and Dennett (1991), this centripetal presence is not natural, but constructed. We live in an era characterized by the illusion of it, in power relations as in media discourses. But even if it is evident, it is not automatic. Having a story in which I am the protagonist is a possible solution; to find a totem, a god, a myth, a simulacrum with the capacity to coordinate the parts of my everyday experience; a simple, basic evidence of the bond that links all my multiple energies and directions. Tag terms as subcultural or lifestyle's ones are good for that, furnishing an identity tool ready to use; a perspective, an action range, a possibility for a reflexive thought. All these gates are not "deus ex machina" objects, but battlegrounds, where many actors fights and reformulate social meaning and individual aspirations.

The question is "who or what is my referent?". The question can be inside us, if we believe in an internal unity of subject. Another possibility is on the limen between our traits and the opposite ones in discursive strategies, according to Hall (1997). Usually the response is dynamic, fluid and subjective. The task is to try to make it happens, and one way, indeed old but still innovative, is the metaphorical thought.

The metaphor as creative universe

"The map is the territory": with this Korzybski's phrase, Bateson (1972) suggests a radical position, quite near to Ricoeur's one: everything is interpretation, all is a complex kind of representation, lens on lens, human and only human intermediations of objective reality. This is the same conclusion done by Eco (1975), when he postulates the concept of "Enciclopedia", developing and moving map of significant and meaning, composed by semiotic entities that are cultural but also contextual. The production of meaning is located, the codex as connection rule remains but without be an imposition. In these process, ludic, imaginative and medial practices become central in framing, because they permit a concentration of reality and an active exploration of it. The first adjective is due to the importance of the playing moment as incubator of cognitive schemata, voluntary act that needs the power of imagination: as observed by Callois "every game needs a temporary acceptance (…) of a limited, conventional and, for some aspects, fictional universe" (1958, p.36).[1] Metaphor is a further step, if we intend it non only as rhetorical dispositive, but in cognitive movement terms. As suggested by Ricoeur (1990), it is a new way to give meaning. Furthermore, it becomes a process through which people try to solve an enigma, to color an empty wall. It is the same solution, with the creation of a new semantic connection: we are talking about a living language, in which there is an active interpretation by listener as by creator. For Blumenberg, its nature is pragmatic: "their content determines, as orientating term,

[1] When the quote refers to the Italian version of the book, an English translation is proposed by the author in the main text, and the original Italian passage is put in notes, like in the following sample: "Ogni gioco presuppone l'accettazione temporanea, se non di un'illusione (…) almeno di un universo chiuso, convenzionale e, sotto determinati aspetti, fittizio".

a behavior; they give the world a structure, a representation of everything of reality, that as such is never controllable or experienced" (2009, pp. 16-17).[2]

To sum up, we have a creative reference, that is much more than a simple description but also far away from representation due to its making logic. Gauntlett (2007)[3] observes that it is the most creative part of everyday speech. I want to specific that when I use the term "creativity", I intend a "process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy" (Gauntlett, 2011, p.76). Nothing epic or famous, but typical of everyday life; a sensibility also present in tactic consumption of De Certeau (1980), now even actual in DIY (Do It Yourself) social movements, moved by the "rejection of the idea that you overcome problems by paying somebody else to provide a solution (…). DIY culture says that (…) you can do it yourself, and you can do it with more creativity, character, and relevance than if you got a generic or 'expert' solution" (Ibidem, p.56). Making something creative is set within our culture, evoking values as autonomy, community feelings, mastering skills and abilities against the expert knowledge well described by Giddens (1991).

About metaphor the cognitivist approach of language is similar: for it it conveys a conceptual question, that can be answered with different languages and codex. The fundamental focus is the bond which links the target domain, "the thing that is being talked about", to the source one, "the source of a meaningful conceptual model through which we understand the target" (Gauntlett, 2007, p.146). The metaphor maps and exports elements from the second to the first; due to the difference between domains this relation is not a perfect equivalence, but some traits of one touch some traits of the other: it's an ambiguous and fluid bridge. Furthermore and connected with this, the metaphor builds itself on the agency, not only on language. As suggested by Lakoff and Johnson, quoted in Gauntlett, "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of how we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Ibidem, p.148). So our experience of the world is structured by it, never forgetting the jumps that allow us to cross linguistic and conceptual boundaries.

The question is about the manner in which this passage "happens". Some metaphors are so natural that lose their creative impact: they become common representations, no more a fresh paradigm of action. Streets so much known to sacrifice every possible creativity within them, maybe constitutive of an entire perspective that has become

[2] "Il loro contenuto determina, come termine di orientamento, un comportamento; esse danno una struttura al mondo, danno una rappresentazione del tutto della Realtà, che come tale non è mai sperimentabile né dominabile".

[3] In his famous work on creativity and metaphor (2007) he has tried to postulate a tool to investigate identity through the active use of Lego by people analyzed.

diffused.[4] A new metaphor conveys an addition of knowledge production, a surplus: "the turning points make more evident the pecularities of the metaphors and of the related expressive forms" (Blumenberg, p.89).[5] In the end, metaphors are fundamental to understand the manner in which we visualize the world and how we act and operate in it. To sum up, the metaphor is a fresh connection, a special articulation that it's not a simple equivalence, but a creative combination (with links to identity when it consolidates itself in person behavior). They are also facilitating tools in order to build an operative visualization of concepts hard to report. According to Gauntlett, "metaphors are conceptual mappings. Although the can be express in language, the metaphor is not merely contained in the words, but is about the connection of concepts" (2007, p.149). Furthermore, I suggest that the metaphorical addiction concerns an increased comprehension of technology that regulates a specific object. In martial arts it's very common the visualization of mental images (or process, think about a wave), in order to execute a specific movement (a circular kick). It's not only an association, but much more: a translation of mechanism that cross the linguistic limen; it's an help for the mental frame but also for the act itself.

The reason of using metaphors in social research

The importance of metaphor in social research sounds more or less automatic. Letting us to capture complex ideas in simpler and understandable involucres, it is a very interesting way to obtain data and information impossible to get with other procedures. This already happens in common interviews, when metaphors appear as illuminating dispositive. In such moments we are used to use the verbal language as main medium, due to its being the "primary modeling tool" of humanity, as observed by Lotman and Uspenskij (1975) (close to Lancan and Hall positions; but while for the first we are talking about a sort of prison, for the second this status concerns a sort of creativity inside the discursive construction of the self). But there exist further expressive ways, that can feed the metaphoric thought: in Blumenberg words, "Not only language is before us and establish our vision of the world; in a more evident way we are dominated by an imaginary apparatus and related selection, in the tunes of which is able to be shown and that we can translate in experience" (2009, pp. 73-74).[6] If metaphor is the focus of our research, a preliminary goal is to individuate, maybe by interviews and observations, the favorite medium, in other words the expressive modality that results more natural and immediate for the single person that I want to

[4] Some metaphors become so important to touch every field of society, from institution to single perception (think about the position of the earth in relation to sun, a discover that revolutionized the way to think to everything). These general models risk to lost their metaphorical halo because they structure reality and are no more shortcuts to comprehend what is around me.

[5] "i momenti di passaggio [che] faranno risultare più accentuatamente la specificità delle metafore e delle loro forme espressive."

[6] "Non solo la lingua ci precede nel pensiero e ci sta per così dire "alle spalle" nella nostra visione del mondo; in modo ancor più cogente noi siamo determinati da un apparato di immagini e dalla loro selezione, "canalizzati" in ciò che in generale ci si può mostrare e che noi possiamo tradurre in esperienza."

engage; I call it the "daimon language", choosing the Socratic term to point out the feeling of easiness in the self-report, the pure presence perceived in transmit mental images, to me and to others (if there is a fusion; on contrary we will see a bi-dimensional language to account with attention). Indeed, this communicative preference depends on the individual traits and the social contexts in which they are set, and changes every time even if in some social groups and subcultures can show similarities and coherence. Furthermore, technology, media literacy and media system are fields that we have to analyze in order to comprehend the discursive structures that people meet in their routine and inspirations. We are talking about the link, the ground in which the contact between source plan and target one take place. It's a matter of media, of possibilities that people have to tell stories and make maps on their experience. The attention has to be put on canal (the technic part) but also on practice (my movement through the canal). So the link shows also a configurative and performative aspect. It adds elements, and reformulates the two objects called in action.

Going beyond the two opposites, the imaginary, seen as the incubator of images that we can use for every type of purpose, is transversal to them. To carry and idea on the ground I can use another abstract idea, maybe with the difference that the latter is touched by popular culture and lives a sort of concreteness. There are milestone texts, able to furnish a large landscape of potential gates and keys of meaning, a tangible "semio-sphere". Next to this, imagination is "the mental power to concept images" (Tolkien, 2003, p. 206).[7] This is not a natural dimension, but a skill that I learn and stress concerning to the cultural habits that I live; consequently popular culture and diffuse fictions are relevant. By the way, metaphors symbolize that in a very specific way. It's what Castaneda calls "to sustain the vision" (1971), in other words to make operative and not only contemplative an illusion, a choice and not a simplistic entertainment. Again, games are a sort of metaphorical range, where I create a frame of rules and goals following an 'even if' logic (Huizinga, 1939). In this case the process is collective, sometimes with creative consequences for the outside.

Metaphor, as creative practice, can be analyzed in tridimensional perspective (the ideal, the link, the simulacrum), parallel to the basic linguistic circuit (expression, concept, referent) (Basile, 2001) with the difference that ideal and simulacrum are both concepts and referents, and that the link has a very specific nature here; indeed we can adopt procedural lens, trying to understand the passage between the starting object to the final one, passing on the bridge of the translation. More interesting is the case in which this creation is collective: if we set a place with specific elements and ask to a group to represent their identity, we will have a collective metaphor. The differences between representation, interpretation and metaphor are not so easy to determine; usually in the everyday language they appear the same thing. I want to

[7] "Il potere mentale di concepire immagini"

spend some words to prevent possible misunderstandings: the representation is an iconic, indical or symbolic movement from an object to another, following a structural semiotic approach; the interpretation is the act to give frame/meaning to a thing (etc.); the metaphor is a procedural abduction that presupposes a process similarity between two or more things and their potentials. For the last, we may suggest that it reveals a dynamic concentration of sense in order to establish a connection; it breaks the common roads that connect images to things; it offers a new track of meaning, procedural in its own heart.

The Tomen

The point is what dimension or keyword I want to investigate, and if there exist elements which let me think that verbal language is not the best choice to explore it. A possible cause could be a barrier due to taboos, disturbing topics, etc. Furthermore, the theme that I want to study may result difficult to articulate in a verbal discussion, also because the necessary reflectivity is not ready to act in people interviewed. In these case, when the subject gets stuck, a possible solution could be the tomen.[8]

With this word I intend and artifact or an "art-place", build by a person or by a group with the purpose to explain, refer to, illustrate something different which has not a fixed visualization referent (we exclude physical objects, for example). The starting point is simply to submit a specific topic, an enigma to frame; the answer materializes into a lived content, that can be both autonomous (I may already find it in people production) and activated by the researcher request. Its making must be a creative process, with the aim to make this object a sort of animated thing, a mirror totem relating to the field which I try to coverage (and that it maybe can modify or change); this trait should be improved by the step by step creation. Again, the tomen aspires to be an access point to self-discursiveness, to an entire imaginary universe: commercial things and not only experiential goods show this using eventuality, for example gadgets furnish a link to related fiction worlds. Cultural contents are like spider webs, full of connections, references and quotes; furthermore there exist evoking surfaces, able to dress a large range of experiential points and to work as a guide. Tomens are the top of an iceberg, whose personal dimension conveys a recall to people, an incorporation that tends to cover the traits of the cognitive translation and help me to talk about it, the assemblage of metaphor, the tomen itself. We are managing not only ideas but also feeling, emotions, engagements. Usually researchers cross the holes of the semiotic map of interviewed with their personal intervention; nothing strange, the interpretation of data is a solid and scientific based reality. By the way with the support of a metaphorical tool the situation seems to be more internal and less intrusive. If we consider people social and relational constructs, central is the "daisen" suggested

[8] The union of "to" and "men", to stress the idea and the hope of communicative halo take by this method. Furthermore, it is similar to "totem", an entity that in ascent times broke up the distance between reality and representation.

by Heidegger (1927), the being that is "to be with". But what referent has this never ending communication? The tomen could represent a sort of temporary speaking focus, a center about some specific topics, a suture point in discursive dynamics; from the Cultural Studies approach, this is the process of identity (Hall, 1997) with the addition of a practical dimension. As said before, every discursive center is assembled, constructed: here is the person in front of me who does that.

Fundamental in this approach it's the tomen report, its "ex-post" explanation to researcher by the author. It isn't important the object itself, but the result of its being a metabolizer of thoughts for author. We return to and have again a verbal form (even if this not the only way to do that, and we can thing a sort of meta-metaphor, a matrioska of active explanations), but richer and more complex than in the past. Another source could be the creating-diary, the genealogy of the making-off, the "ex-ante". Of course we are not referring to a pure result; if requested, it is influenced by the researcher's will. However, this logic is the same of the qualitative interview one, and the expression code chosen is not the best in an absolute way, but the grammar more familiar to a person. We know that, but a constructive perspective considers these traits as innate in social research. Again, people must be truly and strongly engaged in analysis goals. The tomen proposal is a sort of task, a mission that they have to accept and engage with the most effort. With artistic, creative and subcultural personalities the persuasion usually shows an easy level in reaching and generating enthusiasm, but in other cases the researcher has to do a great work, also in advising the tomen language.

So the creation of the tomen consists in the making of a simulacrum able to contain the cognitive and expressive process of visualization of a problem (quit ambiguous to permit freedom, and not static at all). It's a sort of solution to an enigma, a puzzle suggested by the researcher. In my studies on subcultures, I'm testing two main tasks to submit to specific members of these communities, in order to obtain and let realize more conscious contents.

The first is what I call the "cultural diorama" perspective, in other words the vision on the cultural nebula we are talking about. It's a sort of list of articulations that in their connections unify some issues, following an objective tendency, a bird eye point of view. In my research I ask about the 'nerd' culture, obtaining a lot of practical diorama (from pictures and maps to machinimas and videos) that help subjects to visualize the question but also the answer themselves.

Next to this, the second is the "positioning act", how the person places himself inside the previous landscape. Here it emerges the subjective dimension, also stressing the precedent work. Again, I have got very interesting works that reveal the point of view, the relation between the person and his culture; in other words the real cultural landscape.

In this way we have two tomens, two linked metaphors started by simple and at the same time hard questions (or missions, if you prefer). It's not hard to imagine an articulated series of metaphorical tomens, connected by relation of contiguity, association, causality, combination, alternation, etc. Or maybe the subject prefers to use a mix of expressions (whose media are not natural but artificial, and this explains their dynamism). In the end, the goal remains the same. Again, a tomen can be expressed in a language composed by places and practical sets (think about a game design document), not by an object. In this case we have a social referent, not more individual; there is a sort of switch that makes the author a researcher of 2nd level. At this point we have new opportunities also for the communication of the research itself.

Subcultural worlds are particularly indicated for these experiments because they are often characterized by a pretension to peculiar expressive activities and a significant background used as incubator of scripts and schemata. By the way the preference is often individual and usually it has to be consider in this way. But, even if the choice of totem is preferred spontaneous, by the interviewed (using the "Daimon language"), the researcher can impose a peculiar metaphorical link. Obviously this decision must be motivated, and it's dangerous for two main reasons: the first is that the language selected can be erroneous for the subject's intervention and involve alterations with its experiential design; the second, correlated, is the disengagement of the subject himself.

The making of totem could be individual or collective, depending on the lens that I want to use. Again, it may be articulated in several milestones, in order to structure the rhythm of the research. Usually in my experience freedom has proved to be the best choice, because it makes people autonomous and more reactive. Laboratorial settings and/or times are less appealing and their rapidity is ephemeral, but they have the advantage to furnish the control of time and space (also if I want to observe the making process) and help the concentration of people involved. Again, in collective process we can observe the developing of discussion, the creation of roles and rules, etc. From a certain point of view, a game dynamic.

The potential of digital tomen and the ludic heat

The tomen needs a physical status, but there is not discrimination if it is real or virtual. On contrary, a digital nature let us to obtain digital data available for computing process. If we imagine an object able to recorder all the configurative modifications received, we can extend considerations following a quantitative approach, concerning the product and the making act in a bigger population; of course this type of data is not enough and present limitations, but it represents an interesting comparative front. This can be already seen in game metrics in game industry and in performative toys, which recover inputs got and, according to them, change their same nature. Digital worlds are another interesting fields to investigate and to use in an active manner.

With all the necessary differences, in virtual setting I can often modify rules in order to create experimental spaces; grounds where people can move and interact and I have the opportunity to study them. Think about Minecraft, a sort of digital Lego editor that has had a great success in last years. But also we may imagine the future of augmented reality, proved by Google's project Ingress. In such case metaphor becomes essential in engagement terms (tell me a story, make me an universe) and when it is collective this valence is double. In other words, a matter of game design. As written before, a game can be described as a metaphor in its developing; a solution to an enigma, a movement to a structured arrival point. Classical sessions but also dedicated web platforms like Vassall are precious grounds where people perform and express themself in the canonic magic circle through the game mask; a surface metaphor of practices, following our previous definitions. If we intend game and play as an encyclopedic movement to an unknown point artificially set, we understand how these moments show an authentic potential to accelerate emersion, both in real and in virtual moments (think about traditional game sessions that use Skype [etc.] to connect distant people, often friends). The researcher can study them as methodological spaces, in their original constitution but also thinking about a reformulation depending on research goals. We are talking about a forcing of the ludic environment, whose necessary background is the formulation of the gameplay as social metaphor. I'm not referring to the canonic role play game, not at all. Indeed, in this type of practice usually we find a strong similarity to normal life (due to this, fantasy [etc.] versions are more stimulating). But also the simple starting mission to create a single tomen could be seen under a ludic light, and also proposed with this trait.

Conclusions

To sum up, we can have an object-oriented tomen (create me something related to an idea, arriving to a product) or an experience-oriented one (I give a set, a "sandbox" to you and eventually to other participants; or maybe a subject answer the tomen request creating a place of interaction, like a game, a play drama, etc.). The immersion into metaphorical logic can be both individual and collective, and be observed before and after the tomen making. Again, we must regulate the control of interviewed on it, calibrating expression but, at the same time, the direction of our research. The attention can focus on the process and/or, in alternative, on the object itself, using a semiotic approach in order to find and to understand textual "isotopie" (textual recurrences) and inner meanings. Even if my proposal is fundamental theoretical and needs a systemic improvement, the practical implications are already evident. In my studies on subcultures this method has helped me to extend the potential of qualitative approach, and allows me to touch a deeper level of synergy and interaction with people interviewed. By the way we are only in the beginning, and the entire horizon of the gaming and digital metaphors has to be discover for an efficient and active use from academy.

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