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Metaphor, mythology, and everyday language

Eve Sweetser

Department of Linguistics, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA

Abstract

It has long been a familiar fact that mythologies involve metaphorical and symbolic structures. This paper will attempt to expose some of the relationships between those structures and the metaphorical structures commonly found in everyday language. Although this is part of a project which will eventually involve more crosscultural comparison, I intend to focus here on one particular and well-documented mythological tradition within the Indo-European linguistic and cultural community: namely, classical Greek mythology. It will become evident that this tradition has startling parallels with everyday metaphorical structures even in such a distant branch of Indo-European as English.

1. Ontology and family structure

Hesiod describes the world as consisting of the Sky God (or the succession of Sky Gods) and the Earth Goddess, Ouranos and Gaia. This is at least partly an image-metaphor, a mapping of the physical structure of the earth (seen as flat, not globe-shaped) and the sky onto a man lying on top of a woman. Further image-metaphoric structuring maps precipitation, which falls from the sky onto the earth, onto ejaculation of semen from the male body into the female one during intercourse. The crucial role of rain in allowing vegetation to grow (making the earth fertile) is mapped onto the need for semen to enter the womb for conception of a child to take place.

This metaphor is not only about creation, but about ontology. The earth and sky's physical configuration is not a one-time past event, which generated the universe: since they remain permanently in the same physical proximity, they are forever copulating, forever re-creating the universe by their fertile intercourse. In any case, the other gods are all descendents of this first and eternal mating. And those gods metonymically represent nearly all the other parts of the universe: the sea and the underworld, the sun and the moon, different kinds of people (smiths, warriors, lovers, ...) and so forth. So the universe is ontologically dependent on the Gaia/Ouranos pairing.

As Turner (1987) has shown in great detail, progeneration is a basic Indo-European (if not universal) metaphor for causal structure and for ontological priority.

Children cannot exist without parents causing them to come into existence by intercourse and child-bearing. Parents, of course, have no such causal dependency on children. This basic causal link is a metaphor for many less obvious connections. For example, humans could not live without an earth and a sky and the rest of the physical structure of the world. But do the earth and the sky seem to need humans to keep going? Surely not. Even though this need not mean that the earth and sky acted causally to bring humans or other parts of the animal/vegetable universe into being, it does mean that there is a one-way dependency relationship. This is the relationship expressed by the assumption that earth and sky are PARENTS OF CREATION.

Turner's CAUSATION IS PROGENERATION metaphor is profusely manifested in language, outside of mythology. I will give English examples, but Turner has presented literary examples from much of Europe and from many different periods. From proverbs like "Necessity is the *mother* of invention" or poetic examples like "Thy wish was *father* ... to that thought"¹ (i.e., wishing caused you to believe the wish was true), to everyday usages like calling Einstein the "father of modern physics", we regularly represent causal structure in terms of physical progeneration.

The family-structure metaphor goes further than just creation as progeneration, however. As Turner points out, family ties can be used as a metaphor for resemblance or relationship between almost anything. Thus, the fact that the Sun, the Moon, and the Sea are members of the same divine family expresses our understanding that they are (1) alike in being eternally present natural phenomena (hence immortal, not like humans), and (2) interrelated with each other: nature is a harmonious whole made up by different related parts. It also expresses the belief that their common eternal ancestors (Earth and Sky) have bequeathed to them their immortal status, as mortal children resemble their parents in being mortal. There are further causal dependencies to be discerned. People experience the sky with no sun or moon in it, but never the sun or the moon with no sky: this suggests that the sun and moon cannot exist without the sky, while the reverse might not be true: that is, we have interpreted the unidirectional correlation as a causal relationship. This causal relationship is appropriately expressed by the fact that the Sun and the Moon are descended from the Sky, rather than the other way around.

Once again, these aspects of kinship metaphors are by no means restricted to mythology. When Hilary Clinton said, "Gennifer Flowers is the daughter of Willie Horton", she was adducing not so much causality as temporal sequence and resemblance between the two cases. As Republicans had used Dukakis' clemency in the Horton case against him (although it was not very relevant to his presidential candidacy), similarly they were using Clinton's none-too-relevant affair with Flowers against him. And the Horton incident preceded the Flowers one. She may also have meant that the success of the Republican publicity in the Horton case had inspired Republicans to make public use of the Flowers case, a genuine causal connection. Poetic examples where kinship (especially siblinghood) means similarity abound: "Sleep is the *sister* of death" means that it resembles death, not that it is caused by

¹ Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part Two*, IV.v.92.

the same things. And a “*grandfather* clause” simply gives special exemptions to cases with temporal priority.

2. Cycles of light, growth, and life

Lakoff and Turner (1987) pointed out that one of our most salient metaphors for life is cycles of light and heat. Thus, life is a day, as in Catullus’ famous poem where he tells his beloved that once life is over, “There is one single everlasting night which must be slept”. Or life is a year: youth is springtime, old age is winter (one might call old age someone’s “autumn years”, and Galsworthy called a happy part of Jolian Forsyte’s old age an “Indian Summer”). These, and references to the lunar cycle as well, are structuring metaphors of the Greek mythological corpus.

Demeter (the Divine Mother) is a later-generation Earth goddess, sister of the latest-generation Sky god, Zeus (the Divine Father, as we see in his Latin name, Jupiter). She is the cause of the yearly cycle of seasons. Her daughter (or her younger self), Persephone (or Demeter Kore, Demeter the Maiden) is stolen by the underworld god of death, and compelled to remain in the underworld as its queen for half the year. This half the year is Fall and Winter, while the fertile Summer and Spring happen when Kore is above ground. In the spring, Kore returns and her joyful mother makes the earth fertile again. Besides Kore, there is another Underworld goddess, Hecate, who is an old crone, rather than a young maiden or a mature fertile woman. There are thus three separate female figures associated with the Earth, and these have been seen by analysts as aspects of the same goddess. The youngest, Kore, is a maiden and is associated with spring, when the foliage and grasses are young, and often beautifully covered with flowers, but still not bearing ripe fruit. Demeter, the mother, is associated with summer and harvest: the period during which plants bear fruit. And Hecate, the old woman, is associated with the end of fall and the winter, when plants die, branches are bare, and there are neither flowers nor fruit.

The structure of the agricultural year is thus mapped onto the human life cycle (as it is also with Christ, in Christian ritual). If the Earth is a woman, in a year it goes from being a young girl to being an old woman; it presumably dies, and is then reborn to be young again in the spring (thus Kore must spend time in the world of the dead, but leaves it again in the spring). The Earth is here metonymic for all the vegetation which undergoes this cycle; and the woman is metaphoric in representing the Earth. The woman’s age is metaphorically mapped onto the season of the year, which is also mapped onto the life-cycle of the vegetation. Thus youth is spring, when plants are still younger and smaller; the cold part of winter, when plants are dead, is death. The woman’s fertility is mapped onto the state of fertility of the vegetation at the relevant season: potential in spring, actually fertile in summer and at harvest time, and no longer fertile in winter.

Heat and light are of course necessities for human and vegetable life alike. The middle of winter has the least of both heat and light, the middle of summer the most; and there is a permanent cycle of such variation. Human beings in fact are warm

while alive and grow cold when they die. Dead people are also located under the ground, where no light reaches them, and where there is less of the sun's heat. Very old people are less active than younger people: activity is correlated with heat in certain other domains (e.g., water boiling when hot), and old people often feel cold more easily than younger ones because of poor circulation and reduced physical activity. Sexual activity in particular is associated with heat because of the increased circulation attendant on both physical exertion and sexual excitement; and standard folk models associate sexual activity with youth and maturity rather than with old age. The prototypical expectation is that the period of fertility is the primary period of sexual activity; and fertility does not continue into old age for women. So there are real correlations on which to base the metaphorical mapping of parts of the human life cycle onto parts of the annual seasonal cycle of warmth, light and plant growth/fertility.

As Lakoff and Turner have pointed out, the same metaphors which structure this mythological cycle are common in language, not just in English but at least in European languages and cultures generally. Artistic portrayal of Spring as a young woman and of Winter as an old man was common throughout the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. Shakespeare's famous sonnet 73, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" treats old age as autumn. In *The Winter's Tale*, he has the heroine give spring flowers to young men who arrive at a festival, and summer flowers to middle-aged guests. And, as cited above, Galsworthy used the phrase "Indian summer" (referring to a summery period in the fall) to describe a happy platonic relationship in Jolian Forsyte, Sr.'s old age.

However, in mapping the human life cycle onto the seasons, one major difference must be taken into account. The seasons recur cyclically. The individual human life only passes through each age once. However, just as plants die only to be replaced by new plants in the spring, so people are replaced by the next generation. So if the human life is a generic, rather than a specific one, then it maps onto the seasons rather well. The same name is given to the Demeter who rules over each summer, and to the Kore who is associated with each spring. As a goddess, although she may have three aspects, Demeter is immortal and can be reborn. She is thus a perfect representation of the generic continuity of human life, in one sense, and of the mapping of that generic continuity onto the life cycle of seasonal vegetation.

3. The Sun and the Moon

The Sun and Moon are a brother-sister pair in Indo-European mythology, Apollo and Artemis in Greek. Both are hunters, carrying bows as their central weapons – unlike, for example, Athena, who carries her spear. Artemis is a virgin, and the patron of virginity and of wild animals. What is it that makes these attributes appropriate to the divinities of the sun and moon, and how do these gods reflect more general cultural and linguistic patterns of metaphor?

First of all, the sun and the moon are both in cyclic orbital relationships with the Earth. The Earth's orbit around the Sun takes a year, while the Earth's rotation on its

axis makes for a daily solar cycle of day and night. The yearly cycle, as mentioned above, has been taken as a prominent metaphor for the human life-span: so, in fact, has the daily one. But the lunar cycle is different. Although the moon disappears and reappears every twenty-eight days, this cycle is far less important than the solar one. The moon is a very secondary source of light (only important in the sun's absence), and gives no heat to the earth at all. The twenty-eight-day length of the period loosely approximates the prototypical length of a woman's menstrual cycle. All of this motivates the mapping of the sun onto a male divinity and the moon onto a female one.

Primary, more powerful=Male

Secondary, less powerful=Female

Yearly/daily cycles of behavior (characterize both sexes)=human life

Monthly cycle of greater/lesser energy=woman's menstrual cycle

How are some of these same metaphors reflected in language and in culture? Making use of the same mythological structures, and of their bases, Henry Wotton metaphorically expressed Elizabeth of Bohemia's female perfection by saying she outshone other women as the moon does the stars ("You meaner beauties of the night ... what are you when the Moon shall rise?").² Louis XVI was not the "Moon King" but the "Sun King", wanting a metaphor to express unrivalled primacy. But Elizabeth I, on the other hand, was regularly metaphorically addressed as Diana, and not as a solar deity, both because she was female and because she remained unmarried (the state of Virginia is named after her sobriquet "the Virgin Queen"). In modern everyday language men and women are not called suns and moons, although we may note that famous figures in sports and the performing arts get called *stars*, and we may speak of the *luminaries* of a scholarly field as well. But we certainly still retain the connection between the male/female contrast and a primary/secondary opposition, which allowed the sun/moon contrast to be mapped onto male and female.

There are a number of cultural reasons why the metaphorical link between the sun/moon pair and the male/female opposition might reasonably have been expected to decline, as it has apparently done. First, of course, our folk theories have changed: we no longer think the moon has any causal connection with the menstrual cycle, or with female psychological disorders (*hysteria*, thought to be caused by the womb – and derived from the Greek word for "womb" – was also thought to be linked to the lunar cycle). Second, the lunar light cycle has diminished in importance as artificial lighting has improved. Two hundred years ago, Jane Austen could write, "it was moonlight, and every body was full of engagements",³ knowing that every English-speaking reader would assume that rural social life revolved around the choice of evenings when you would have enough light to drive your carriage home after dinner. In Western technological nations today, the lunar cycle has so little importance

² 'On his Mistris, the Queen of Bohemia', ll. 1 and 5.

³ *Sense and Sensibility*, chapter VII.

to our daily lives that many of us are unaware of it unless we happen to be out on a moonlit evening.

A further motivation for the traditional connection of the lunar cycle with the menstrual one is that the moon's cycle causes tides in the ocean. The following mapping might be suggested:

the female body=the ocean
the menstrual flow=the tides

Women's inconstancy and desire for variety (likened to water's fluid ever-changing shape and tides) were standard themes in medieval and renaissance European literature, even more so than in classical sources,⁴ and were attributed to their being ruled by the moon. In fact, mortality and mutability on earth were said in general to be due to the fact that the earth is inside the lunar orbit: the "sublunary" world is transitory and changeable, while the heavens above it are eternal.⁵ But women, whose wombs were constantly changing state with the phases of the moon, were considered especially subject to such influence.

The lunar cycle also, like other light cycles, is metaphorically mapped onto the human life cycle, in this case a female life cycle. Artemis is also Hecate. The new moon is young virginity, the full moon mature, fertile (though perhaps virgin) femininity, and the dark of the moon is old age and death. Hecate is goddess of witchcraft and the underworld, but also associated with the moon.

4. Image metaphors

Certain mythological structures seem based on particular metaphorical mappings of images onto other domains. Although some of the specific mappings are different from ones we might use in everyday language, the *kinds* of mappings are no different. Let us look at some of what Lakoff would call *image-schematic* metaphorical mappings, as they appear in both domains.

In the mythological structures examined above, for example, Apollo and Artemis are archers because the rays of the sun and moon are mapped onto the visual image of arrows being shot from a bow. The path traced by light between a source and an endpoint is mapped onto the path traced by an arrow between the archer and the target. The source of light is mapped both spatially and causally onto the archer, who is both responsible for the arrow's flight and located at its source. Since it was believed by the Greeks that the sun's rays were responsible for certain sicknesses,

⁴ Note Catullus' famous *sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua* (Catullus 70, 3–4): "what a woman says to her passionate lover should be written in wind and swift water".

⁵ Cf. John Donne's "dull sublunary lovers", meaning lovers who are linked by transitory love between dying bodies, rather than by eternal love between immortal souls ('A Valediction: forbidding Mourning', line 13).

Apollo's arrows convey not only light but also plagues and healing.⁶ We have also mentioned that the Sky-Earth coupling is an image-metaphor, mapping the vertical proximity of the horizontally extended Sky and Earth onto a sexual coupling between a man and a woman, and precipitation onto ejaculation and fertilization. Zeus' wooing of Danae in "a shower of gold" for Perseus' conception seems clearly another instance of this precipitation image-metaphor for ejaculation. Neither of these metaphors is now standard, though there is some reason to suppose that both were more broadly spread through the ancient world than restricted to Greece.

However, everyday language is full of image-metaphors of the same sort as those which prompted these mythological ones. And modern examples are readily available. English speakers may not think of precipitation as a metaphor for ejaculation or vice versa, but they can say (at least some British speakers) that "it's pissing down" when it is raining: surely a related image-metaphor. A Greek friend tells me that Modern Greek speakers call young Greek men who hang out on beaches (to make sexual contact with tourist girls) "harpoons". The harpoon is an image-metaphor for the male genitals (here a metonym for the male person as a whole), as well as evoking other metaphorical structures such as "courtship is hunting". The American English derogatory male label *prick* reflects the same metonymy and image-metaphor, although the hunting metaphor is not present. Indeed, although Artemis' arrows are not apparently related to sexuality, Apollo's status as a hunter at least may not be unrelated to his many sexual adventures. And Eros' arrows may well be an image-metaphor for his penis (we may note that the female deity of sexuality, Aphrodite, is not an archer like the male Eros). If this is so, then very similar metaphors shape this particular mythological attribute and modern metaphorical uses in Greek and in English.⁷

5. Domains, and attributes

The gods' likenesses (immortality, power, etc.) are counterbalanced by differences: not only are the Greek divinities widely different in behavior and appearance, but also in exactly what powers they possess, and what domains they control. Family structure is again a very appropriate source domain for this aspect of ontology: powerful natural forces are alike in power and in being unsusceptible to human control, but also differ importantly. Humans divide the world into domains of experience, and each of these domains is apparently structured by *frames* (cf. Fillmore, 1976, 1985). A frame is a structured grouping of aspects of experience, each of which is often sufficient to evoke the whole frame in a speaker's mind. For example, it has long been known that if a speaker mentions *a restaurant*, she then has the right

⁶ As in the first book of the *Iliad*, when Apollo shoots down a plague on the Greek army.

⁷ Modern English terms for unattractive women, such as (*old*) *bag*, reflect another image-metaphor, mapping the female genitalia onto a container such as a bag, and also metonymically referring to the person via reference to the genitalia.

to say *the table, the menu*, using definite NPs as if these objects were already part of the conversational content.

What appears to be happening in the case of the Greek gods is that each god is assigned certain frames, as domains of control. Medicine, or business, or home, or crafts, is each thus personified metaphorically in the god who presides over it. (Of course, there are further complexities: often where an important deity personifies numerous frames, other less important deities will also personify the more specific domains: Apollo presides over music, but so does the appropriate Muse, for example.) Further frame metonymies connect the gods who metaphorically personify frames to the attributes connected with those frames: the lyre is metonymic for Music, which is personified by Apollo.⁸ Athene's "male" characteristics (intellect, most of all) may partially account for other surprising facts about her: although largely a peaceful figure, she is armed, and fights in battle, fearsome with her Gorgon's Head shield. Co-occurrence in a frame of prototypical maleness is certainly a connection between the otherwise rather unconnected attributes of intellect and fighting ability.

Frame-metonymic structure thus interacts crucially with metaphorical structure in making up the ontology of the world; and indeed, in the modern world the same is often true. At least one of my acquaintances accounts for the scientific ability of one of his four daughters by saying, "She was always the tomboy, even as a child; I knew she wasn't a typical girl". Right or wrong, frame-associations of this kind shape our thought and our ontology.

6. Conclusions

The metaphors involved in mythological structure could be seen, and have often been seen, as essentially cultural and not linguistic. But much recent work supports the conclusion that such a division is misplaced; linguistic structure is a part of culture, and linguistic metaphorical usages are based on broader cultural cognitive structures. This study is a very tentative beginning of an exploration of the interconnections between linguistic everyday metaphor systems and metaphorical cultural models. Since mythology is a cultural ontology with what is commonly a complex metaphorical basis, linguistic usage and mythological structure are not as divergent in their nature as might have been thought.

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⁸ Pamela Morgan has been doing particularly interesting work in this area, and I am indebted to her for personal communication.

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