

**Review of: Örtenblad, Anders (Ed.) (2024). *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780192895707**

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**Abstract**

This review examines *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies*, by A. Örtenblad (Ed.), an expansive and theoretically ambitious collection that repositions metaphor as central to organizational knowledge, communication, and practice. Across six parts, the volume advances metaphor not as a rhetorical ornament but as epistemic infrastructure shaping how organizations are theorized, studied, and governed. Contributions span philosophical, methodological, and applied domains, extending metaphor analysis into multimodal, embodied, visual, and sociomaterial contexts while foregrounding reflexivity, ethics, and power. Overall, the volume offers a timely, generative intervention for organizational studies, organizational communication, and critical management scholarship, inviting researchers to interrogate the metaphors used in and by organizations and individuals, including researchers themselves, and the organizational realities and (im)possibilities those metaphors help produce.

**Keywords**

metaphor, organizational studies, organizational communication

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## **Introduction: Why metaphor, why now?**

Organizational life is rich in metaphor. We speak of “corporate ladders,” organization’s as “living organisms” and “well-oiled machines,” managers turn into “power usurpers,” work bullies become “demons” and “prison guards.” These metaphors are not just rhetorical flourish—they shape how we understand, design, participate in, and manage organizations. In *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies*, editor Anders Örténblad and an international team of contributors revisit metaphor as both the most foundational tool in the organizational scholar’s conceptual toolkit and an indelible part of organizational life and communication. Stretching across theory and application in academic, research, and organizational contexts this collection treats metaphor as a generative force that shapes inquiry, influences practice and organizes social life. It underscores the analytical utility of metaphor and its ontological and epistemological power while also challenging organizational researchers and practitioners alike to reflect on their own use of metaphors and the stakes they carry.

### **Structure and scope**

The volume is divided into six thematic parts, each organized to progressively build the readers’ understanding and appreciation of the topic and guide them from foundational discussions to terrain of application. This modular structure allows the volume to be used flexibly – as a reference, a course text, or an inspiration for future research.

1. *Part I: Theoretical Considerations* revisits core debates on what metaphors are and what they do.
2. *Part II: Metaphors of Management and Organization* explores metaphors across organizational and management contexts and issues.
3. *Part III: The Application of Metaphor in Research* provides tools and frameworks for research and analysis of metaphors.
4. *Part IV: The Use and Abuse of Metaphors in Settings Other than Research* discusses metaphors in pedagogy and organizational communication.
5. *Part V: Perspective on Metaphor* critically assesses conceptual boundaries of a metaphor.
6. *Part VI: Epilogue* focuses on what metaphor research might look like in the future.

## Highlights from each part

### *Part I: Theoretical Considerations*

Part I of the *Handbook* lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding metaphor as a central – yet frequently underrecognized – epistemological force in organizational studies. Rather than treating metaphor as decorative language, the section positions it as foundational to how organizational reality is conceptualized and studied. It opens with Cornelissen’s argument that metaphors are not rhetorical embellishments but core cognitive instruments through which organizational phenomena become thinkable and researchable. Building on Gareth Morgan’s landmark *Images of Organization* (1986), the chapter shows how metaphorical reasoning both enables and constrains organizational knowledge, even when earlier theoretical traditions minimized its role. This foundational claim is deepened through Oswick and Grant’s dialogic engagement with Morgan’s legacy. Revisiting *Images of Organization*, they acknowledge its transformative influence while also critiquing how it has often been reduced to a fixed catalog of metaphor types. Such codification, they argue, risks turning a generative framework into a static toolkit. In response, they advocate for renewed reflexivity and methodological openness, proposing dissonance-based metaphors that foreground contradiction, plurality, and tension rather than coherence and closure.

The section then broadens the conceptual terrain through Cornelia Müller’s contribution, which challenges the familiar binary between “live” and “dead” metaphors. Introducing the concept of “dormant” metaphors, Müller draws attention to the subtle, often unnoticed *metaphoricity* embedded in everyday, multimodal communication. By shifting the analytical focus from metaphor as an object to *metaphoricity* as an ongoing process, Müller emphasizes metaphor’s temporal, embodied, and interactional dimensions in practice.

Closing the section, Garmann Johnsen turns to the philosophical underpinnings of metaphor and meaning. Engaging thinkers such as Cassirer, Locke, and Aristotle, Garmann Johnsen argues that metaphors do not merely describe organizational reality but actively participate in constructing it. Metaphor emerges here as a bridge between language, cognition, and social ontology – shaping not only how organizations are talked about but how they are known and constituted as objects of inquiry.

Taken together, the chapters in Part I reposition metaphor as both an analytical lens and a constitutive process. They invite organizational scholars to move beyond metaphor as illustration

and toward metaphor as infrastructure – while urging ongoing reflexivity about the metaphorical assumptions that underwrite organizational research itself.

## *Part II: Metaphors of Management and Organization*

Part II of the *Handbook* moves from theoretical foundations to the analysis of specific metaphor families in organizational studies, showing how metaphorical frames shape meaning, identity, power relations, and organizational reality. Across domains including Indigenous knowledge, diversity discourse, technology, sport, the arts, and symbolic language, the chapters demonstrate that metaphors are never neutral descriptors but value-laden interpretive devices that both illuminate and constrain understanding.

The section opens with Dell, Spiller, and Staniland’s discussion of Indigenous Māori metaphors such as *rāranga* (weaving) and *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (the four-walled house of well-being). They emphasize that these metaphors are culturally embedded meaning systems grounded in relational accountability and should not be detached from their cultural contexts through unreflective appropriation. Ethical responsibility and relationship building with Indigenous peoples, they argue, must guide metaphor use.

Power and inequality are further examined by Bendl and Schmidt through diversity metaphors such as the “glass ceiling,” showing how such metaphors make systemic exclusion visible while also risking simplification and reification. Several chapters then interrogate dominant metaphors of change. Arman and Wikström critique lifecycle metaphors that naturalize organizational decline, while Audrin and Davoine analyze digital transformation metaphors that frame technology as waves, machines, or brains. Czarniawska’s analysis of the “robot” metaphor highlights its dual promise of liberation and dehumanization.

Other contributions examine sports, music, and dance metaphors, contrasting competitive framings with more improvisational and embodied models of organizing. The section closes with critiques of light/dark metaphors, arguing that portrayals of a singular “dark side” of organizations often oversimplify complex dynamics of power, control, and dysfunction; and color metaphors – such as “white-collar” and “red-collar” – demonstrating how metaphorical meanings shift across cultural and institutional contexts.

Altogether, Part II presents metaphor as a central yet contested mode of organizational sensemaking – capable of both illuminating and distorting. By analyzing concrete metaphor

domains, the section shows how metaphor operates not only as an interpretive lens but also as a site of ethical, political, and epistemic struggle within organizational scholarship and practice.

### *Part III: The Application of Metaphor in Research*

Part III shifts the focus from metaphor as theory to metaphor as methodological practice, emphasizing innovation, reflexivity, and embodiment in organizational research. The section argues that metaphor is not only an object of analysis but also a constitutive force in how research is designed, conducted, and interpreted. By extending metaphor analysis beyond verbal language into visual, gestural, and critical domains, these chapters position metaphor as a multimodal and ethically consequential research tool.

Alvesson, Gabriel, and Sandberg open with a call for metaphorical reflexivity, showing how taken-for-granted metaphors quietly structure every stage of research – from problem framing to theory building. Dominant metaphors such as researcher-as-vocationist or data-as-gap shape what counts as valid contribution. The authors advocate using counter-metaphors to surface hidden assumptions and expand analytical imagination. Metaphor thus becomes both a cognitive scaffold and a creative resource for more original and critical inquiry.

Broadening the lens beyond text, Mitterhofer and Jordan analyze visual metaphors in logos, diagrams, and organizational spaces, arguing that they shape sensemaking and ideology while often escaping scrutiny. They call for more critical engagement with visual representation. Alan Cienki further extends metaphor research into embodiment by examining gesture, demonstrating how abstract organizational ideas are expressed and understood through spatialized hand movements and other bodily cues.

Bruni and Biscaro provide practical guidance for empirical metaphor research, outlining methods for identifying and validating both elicited and naturally occurring metaphors with analytical rigor. The section closes with Lorin Basden Arnold's critical perspective on metaphor analysis and power, urging ethical reflexivity and attentiveness to positionality.

Part III reframes metaphor not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a multimodal, critical, and reflexive methodological resource. The section demonstrates that metaphor research, when conducted with rigor and self-awareness, can deepen analysis, expose hidden assumptions, and contribute to more ethically and epistemically responsible studies of organizational life.

#### *Part IV: The Use and Abuse of Metaphors in Settings Other than Research*

Part IV of the volume examines metaphor in action, focusing on how metaphor operates in organizational practice across innovation, education, and decision-making. Shifting from theory and method to application, the chapters highlight metaphor's capacity to stimulate creativity, learning, and strategic action, while also warning that metaphors can oversimplify, mislead, and narrow thinking when used uncritically. The section advances a shared call for more intentional and reflective metaphor use in practice-oriented contexts.

Biscaro and Bruni open the section by analyzing metaphor's role in innovation and describing metaphors as cognitive and collaborative bridges that enable conceptual expansion, cross-functional dialogue, and persuasive articulation of new ideas. By connecting unfamiliar concepts to familiar frames, metaphors support shared understanding and creative progress. At the same time, the authors caution that overly dominant or poorly chosen metaphors can prematurely lock in interpretations and constrain originality.

The pedagogical dimension of metaphor is taken up by Cynthia Wagner Weick who explores metaphor's pedagogical value in management and organizational education. She argues that metaphors make complex ideas more graspable, surface hidden assumptions, and encourage students to question established mental models. Through metaphorical reframing, learners can imagine alternative organizational realities and build capacity for transformational thinking. However, she warns against relying on culturally narrow, clichéd, or overused metaphors that may reproduce limited viewpoints rather than expand them.

Sonja Sackmann closes the section by examining the seductive power of metaphors in sensemaking and decision processes. Because metaphors simplify complexity and orient action – often unconsciously – they can steer judgments while obscuring alternatives.

Overall, Part IV emphasizes that metaphor is a practical force in organizing, teaching, innovating, and deciding. These chapters portray metaphor as both enabling and hazardous: a resource for navigating complexity and fostering creativity, yet also a source of conceptual blind spots. The section ultimately calls for more mindful, critical engagement with metaphor in organizational practice to harness its generative power without falling prey to its simplifying traps.

#### *Part V: Perspective on Metaphor*

Part V develops the volume's most theoretically advanced perspectives on metaphor, emphasizing its contextual, critical, and ethical dimensions in organization studies. The chapters move beyond application toward deeper questions of culture, evaluation, discourse, materiality, and reflexivity, positioning metaphor as an epistemic force rather than merely an interpretive device.

The section opens with Hugo Gaggiotti and colleagues' analysis of metaphor across linguistic and cultural contexts. They argue that metaphor is both universal and culturally embedded, making translation inherently interpretive. While cross-cultural transfer can flatten nuance, it can also foster learning and epistemological reflexivity when handled carefully. Pinto and Garmann Johnsen extend this contextual emphasis through their discussion of metaphorical valence. Rather than assigning metaphors fixed positive or negative qualities, they propose valence as something that emerges through use and interpretation, offering a more flexible analytical lens.

The next chapters ground metaphor in discourse and material conditions. David Ritchie's study of Steve Jobs's metaphor use shows how evolving metaphor clusters helped shape Apple's design philosophy and leadership identity, supporting a dynamic, discourse-based view of metaphor. Michael Reed, using a critical realist framework, argues that metaphors are embedded in socio-material structures and power relations, mediating between agency and institutional constraint rather than functioning as purely symbolic tools.

The section closes with Letiche and De Loo's reflection on metaphor in the research process itself. Drawing on philosophical traditions, they argue that metaphor shapes researcher identity and ethical engagement. Overall, Part V presents metaphor as a critical and creative force in organizational theorizing and inquiry.

### *Part VI: Epilogue*

In the concluding chapter, Anders Örténblad calls for a more expansive and reflexive approach to metaphor research in organization studies. He encourages scholars to move beyond Morgan's classic set of metaphors by cataloging and reassessing existing ones, developing culturally specific alternatives, and applying established metaphors in unexpected contexts to reveal hidden organizational dynamics. He also introduces "meta-metaphorization" – reflecting on how scholars conceptualize metaphor itself as a lens, tool, or voice – highlighting the need for greater self-awareness in metaphor scholarship. Overall, he urges researchers to use metaphors critically, creatively, and contextually when rethinking organizational realities.

In the afterword, Haridimos Tsoukas situates metaphor within a broader account of analogical thinking, arguing that it is foundational to how organizations are understood. Organizational knowledge, he explains, is built through categories formed by comparison, with new situations interpreted through prior frames. Metaphors enable these conceptual shifts, especially in novel contexts, and are therefore essential – not decorative – to organizational sensemaking. Recognizing the metaphorical and analogical nature of knowledge, he concludes, deepens interpretive insight in organization studies.

### **Critical analysis and evaluation: “Metaphors We X By”**

The *Handbook of Organizational Metaphors* offers a theoretically ambitious and methodologically diverse exploration of metaphor’s role in shaping research into organizations, organizational communication, and organizational knowledge as a whole. Drawing heavily on conceptual metaphor theory, interpretivist sociology, and philosophical traditions from Aristotle to Derrida, the volume makes a compelling case that metaphor is not just a tool of expression but a constitutive element of organizational sensemaking. Chapters by Cornelissen (Chapter 2), Müller (Chapter 4), and afterword by Tsoukas position metaphor as central to epistemology and ontology in organization studies, challenging the field to move beyond instrumental views of language. This theoretical framing is one of the volume’s key strengths: it not only reaffirms metaphor’s foundational role in organizational realities but also updates and deepens its relevance in light of developments in organizational communication and critical organizational studies

A notable strength of the volume lies in its thematic breadth. Part II, for instance, demonstrates metaphor’s cultural and political complexity. Dell et al.’s chapter on Māori metaphors (Chapter 6) celebrates Indigenous metaphors and their value in cultivating better organizing globally but cautions against universalizing them and separating from simultaneously building relationships with Indigenous peoples; while Bendl and Schmidt’s analysis of diversity metaphors (Chapter 7) reveals how even critical metaphors can entrench the very inequalities they seek to expose. These contributions exemplify the volume’s commitment to reflexivity and decolonial critique. Similarly, chapters in Part III expand the methodological repertoire by exploring gesture (Chapter 17), visual metaphor (Chapter 16), and metaphor identification tools (Chapter 18). This multimodal emphasis is both timely and original, offering new avenues for studying metaphor

beyond textual analysis. The book also engages with power and ethics, especially in Chapters 19 and 26, which urge scholars to interrogate the ideological work metaphors perform.

While the volume's breadth is one of its great strengths, it also introduces certain challenges. For instance, although several chapters seek to move beyond Gareth Morgan's canonical eight metaphors, many still position his framework as either a reference point or a counterfoil. This ongoing engagement may indicate the enduring relevance of Morgan's work, but it also reflects the difficulty of fully decentering a dominant paradigm. Additionally, the volume's wide scope produces some variation in tone and depth. As with many edited collections, the shifts between methodological, empirical, and philosophical contributions present a minor coherence challenge, though not one that undermines the overall impact or integrity of the work

Overall, the *Handbook* succeeds in its core purpose: to reanimate metaphor as a generative, critical, and interdisciplinary concept in organization studies. It builds on and extends existing scholarship – from Morgan and Lakoff to Ricoeur and Fairclough – while also incorporating new voices and modes of analysis. Its originality lies in pushing metaphor beyond language, into gesture, image, rhythm, and relational practice. The book will be especially valuable to scholars interested in qualitative research, critical management studies, and epistemology. While it sometimes falters in balancing breadth with depth, its contributions are substantial and provocative. Most importantly, it challenges readers to reflect on the metaphors they inhabit – an intellectual and ethical invitation that few organizational texts make so powerfully.

## Conclusion

The *Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies* offers a wide-ranging, theoretically rich, and methodologically innovative account of how metaphors shape – and are shaped by – organizational thought and practice. It repositions metaphor not as linguistic ornament, but as a central mechanism of epistemology, cognition, and critique.

This volume will be of particular value to scholars in organizational theory, critical management studies, qualitative research, and anyone interested in the politics of language and knowledge. It is especially recommended for researchers seeking to push beyond static categories and toward more dynamic, multimodal, and culturally grounded understandings of organizational life. By drawing from cognitive linguistics, philosophy, and postcolonial critique, the book provides tools for reimagining organizations and research practices alike.

In sum, *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies* is a robust, timely, and necessary contribution that invites readers to interrogate the metaphors they use—and the worlds those metaphors create.

## **References**

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