

## Poetry for Everyday Life by David Brooks

Here's a clunky but unremarkable sentence that appeared in the British press before the last national election: "Britain's recovery from the worst recession in decades is gaining traction, but confused economic data and the high risk of hung Parliament could yet snuff out its momentum."

The sentence is only worth quoting because in 28 words it contains four metaphors. Economies don't really gain traction, like a tractor. Momentum doesn't literally get snuffed out, like a cigarette. We just use those metaphors, without even thinking about it, as a way to capture what is going on.

In his fine new book, "I Is an Other," James Geary reports on linguistic research suggesting that people use a metaphor every 10 to 25 words. Metaphors are not rhetorical frills at the edge of how we think, Geary writes. They are at the very heart of it.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, two of the leading researchers in this field, have pointed out that we often use food metaphors to describe the world of ideas. We devour a book, try to digest raw facts and attempt to regurgitate other people's ideas, even though they might be half-baked.

When talking about relationships, we often use health metaphors. A friend might be involved in a sick relationship. Another might have a healthy marriage.

When talking about argument, we use war metaphors. When talking about time, we often use money metaphors. But when talking about money, we rely on liquid metaphors. We dip into savings, sponge off friends or skim funds off the top. Even the job title stockbroker derives from the French word *brocheur*, the tavern worker who tapped the kegs of beer to get the liquidity flowing.

The psychologist Michael Morris points out that when the stock market is going up, we tend to use agent metaphors, implying the market is a living thing with clear intentions. We say the market climbs or soars or fights its way upward. When the market goes down, on the other hand, we use object metaphors, implying it is inanimate. The market falls, plummets or slides.

Most of us, when asked to stop and think about it, are by now aware of the pervasiveness of metaphorical thinking. But in the normal rush of events, we often see straight through metaphors, unaware of how they refract perceptions. So it's probably

important to pause once a month or so to pierce the illusion that we see the world directly. It's good to pause to appreciate how flexible and tenuous our grip on reality actually is.

Metaphors help compensate for our natural weaknesses. Most of us are not very good at thinking about abstractions or spiritual states, so we rely on concrete or spatial metaphors to (imperfectly) do the job. A lifetime is pictured as a journey across a landscape. A person who is sad is down in the dumps, while a happy fellow is riding high.

Most of us are not good at understanding new things, so we grasp them imperfectly by relating them metaphorically to things that already exist. That's a "desktop" on your computer screen.

Metaphors are things we pass down from generation to generation, which transmit a culture's distinct way of seeing and being in the world. In his superb book "Judaism: A Way of Being," David Gelernter notes that Jewish thought uses the image of a veil to describe how Jews perceive God — as a presence to be sensed but not seen, which is intimate and yet apart.

Judaism also emphasizes the metaphor of separateness as a path to sanctification. The Israelites had to separate themselves from Egypt. The Sabbath is separate from the week. Kosher food is separate from the nonkosher. The metaphor describes a life in which one moves from nature and conventional society to the sacred realm.

To be aware of the central role metaphors play is to be aware of how imprecise our most important thinking is. It's to be aware of the constant need to question metaphors with data — to separate the living from the dead ones, and the authentic metaphors that seek to illuminate the world from the tinny advertising and political metaphors that seek to manipulate it.

Most important, being aware of metaphors reminds you of the central role that poetic skills play in our thought. If much of our thinking is shaped and driven by metaphor, then the skilled thinker will be able to recognize patterns, blend patterns, apprehend the relationships and pursue unexpected likenesses.

Even the hardest of the sciences depend on a foundation of metaphors. To be aware of metaphors is to be humbled by the complexity of the world, to realize that deep in the undercurrents of thought there are thousands of lenses popping up between us and the world, and that we're surrounded at all times by what Steven Pinker of Harvard once called "pedestrian poetry."