Dangerous liaisons: Metonymic effects between school and education

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Abstract
This paper considers the ways in which the words “school” and “education” are conflated in the social imaginary, and what the effects of this conflation in meaning and purpose are both theoretically and in practice. It is not difficult to see the ways in which these two terms are used almost synonymously, and uncritically. Yet “school” and “education” operate in a double-bind, as both are interchangeable in meaning while simultaneously opposed to each other: education is often defined as a traditional process, whereas school is a formal, updated structuring of that process. This paper looks first at the place of metaphor in terms of the construction of knowledge, and how that produces both a “proper” as well as a forgetting within and through discourses. Following Nietzsche’s concept of metaphoricity, note is then taken of the distinctions between both the meaning and uses of metaphor and metonymy, in that the former creates conditions of applicability between concepts, while the latter allows one thing to stand in for another, effectively subsuming meaning altogether. These various notions are then applied to a trio of case studies, specifically from the region in Oceania commonly known as Micronesia, where interplay of metaphoricity and its effects on and in purportedly decolonizing contexts can be seen. Finally, a pair of schools in a Dr. Seuss tale are visited that provide a positive reticulation of spaces of education that is not beholden to the pernicious effects of metaphorical forgetting, substitution, and erasure, nor to a search for origins and latency.

Keywords
Metaphor, metonym, Nietzsche, Micronesia, Dr. Seuss

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“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means”.


**Introduction: when education is school**

If one goes to the TED Topics page (https://www.ted.com/topics/education) and finds “Education,” one will be confronted with the overarching question posed (and one presumes, answered) by the multitude of talks on offer: “How do we reinvent education?” This is a provocative and important question, albeit one that assumes a number of things, not the least of which is that “education” needs to be reinvented. More problematic, however, is the answer, which proclaims “These TED Talks explore the latest thinking – from teachers, parents, kids – on how to build a better school.” Curiously, “education” is missing from this formulation, and one could be forgiven for conflating the notions of “school” – or more precisely, “better school” – with “education.” But what is Ted really asking? More importantly, perhaps, what does it think it is asking?

This type of uncertainty between these terms is by no means uncommon, nor is it relegated to the TED website. One need only consider the purview of the US Secretary of Education, whose focus is almost entirely on schools; or for that matter, the title of the largest organization in North America dedicated to the field of “education,” the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Schools, which are what a majority of the AERA’s annual conference is about, are implied, suggesting that education serves as a stand-in for school/ing. Or, perhaps it is the case that there is so much confusion and overlap about these terms in the social linguistic imaginary that they are just assumed to be the same thing, and they are in fact used in such a way. Of the talks and presentations given at the 2016 AERA conference, 1158 had the word “school” in their titles – and I believe them, in that they are actually researching and reporting on schools and schooling. But even more, 1509 titles employ the word “education” – but are they all speaking to education, or, like the answer posed by TED, are they in fact using “education” as a referent for their actual subject: school?

In *Deschooling Society*, Illich (1971: 1) refers to schooling as the “institutionalization of values”; for the purposes of this paper, what are the effects of that sort of institutionalization of language on meaning? What happens when schooling and education are conflated, for them to mean the same thing, to treat them as equals? What is the effect of using these terms as synonymous? To be sure, I am arguing here that schooling and education are indeed different, although their overlap has caused the social imaginary to blur, if not erase, the important distinctions between the two.

What follows is an attempt to consider the concepts “education” and “school” in terms of their metaphoricity, as well as the dangers potentially inherent in deploying them as equivalents in particular contexts. First, this paper will look at the place of metaphor in terms of the construction of knowledge, and how that produces both a “proper” as well as a forgetting within and through discourses. Following Nietzsche’s concept of metaphoricity, note is then taken of the distinctions between both the meaning and uses of metaphor and metonymy, in that the former creates conditions of applicability between concepts, while the latter allows one thing to stand in for another, effectively subsuming meaning altogether.
These various notions are then applied to a trio of case studies, specifically from the region in Oceania commonly known as Micronesia, where the interplay of metaphoricity and its effects on and in purportedly decolonizing contexts can be seen. Finally, a pair of schools in a Dr. Seuss tale are visited that provide a positive reticulation of spaces of education that is not beholden to the pernicious effects of metaphorical forgetting, substitution, and erasure, nor to a search for origins and latency.

It is common to revert to a default position of origins, in meaning and etymology, in order to discover any workable variances in the terms “education” and “school.” And where, exactly, does this lead? I argue that this search for origins – or more properly, original meaning or intention – does not offer anything of importance. As Fritz Mauthner (1901; 1902), the Austro-Hungarian writer and proponent of Kantian skepticism, quoted in Gray (2013: 143), puts it, “The need for peace seduces the human mind into seeing the mirage of a resting-place in the desert of its striving for knowledge; the scholars believe in their linguistic roots.” Additionally, in his Contributions to a Critique of Language, Mauthner (1901; 1902) “acknowledges that an argument about a principle of linguistic growth technically should not be extended to the question of origin” (Bredeck, 1992: 90). Thus, here I am not engaging in attempts to define either education or school.

What matters, in the end, is how these terms are employed and what their effects are. Kofman (1993: 85), in her analysis of Nietzsche’s engagement with metaphor and metaphorical reasoning, reminds us that “One must not confuse the origin of an institution with its goal, for that would amount to the belief that its meaning is unchanging and independent of those who are its masters ... Grasping the goal of an institution simply means comprehending that a will to power succeeded in mastering something less powerful than itself; it does not mean grasping its origin.” Rather, these terms, education and school, operate metaphorically, and in so doing demonstrate the construction of what Nietzsche calls a “proper”; that is, a term that stands in for an idea that is far removed from its actual meaning, one that has forgotten, through its metaphoricity, its essence.

This turn of events, based on the effects of a “proper,” is both productive of relations of power and dangerous in its insistence on intentionally forgetting. The “proper” meaning expresses a system of forces, and the meaning is derived by displacing – repressing – the originary forces and their evaluations, resulting in their disfigurement” (Kofman, 1993: 89). Thus, it is not the original meanings of school or education that matter, even though their etymologies show us how they have been disfigured in meaning. Origins are not as important as effects – and just how little we understand those effects when we deploy metaphors to mean the same thing, and erase distinctions. Indeed, origins lead us to a unity of meaning, where no unity necessarily exists. Here Nietzsche (1992 [1887]: 513) instructs, “all subduing and becoming master involves fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.”

Yet it is also not enough to look for simplistic distinctions so as to result in defining ideas or concepts as evasive as education and school. If the reticulations of space and place are to be seriously considered, it is too easy to reduce school to a place and education to a process, or to engage in other binaries of similarity: formal/informal; deliberate/unintentional, etc. There is a complex, occasionally adversarial relationship between these terms, but it would be an otiose exercise to either simply oppose or synonomize them. Hamilton and Zufiaurre (2013: 6, 7) importantly offer a guide here for possible analysis, as they trace the various components of education and schooling – deliberately treated as separate subjects and networks of power relations – in order to examine the various purposes of these concepts:
“As we see it, education is not the same as schooling. But it is not easy to distinguish one from the other... Such a convergence [of similarity between the two] relies on the erroneous assumption that education and schooling are merely different versions of the same activity which merely lie at different points on the same continuum.” One can also turn to Biesta, for example, on the distinctions made between schooling and pedagogy (which is a separate concept and set of relations altogether) (Saeverot, 2013).

The discourse, however, all too often makes no such distinction, and in fact assigns identical purposes to both education and school through the limits of language, and specifically metaphorical language. In this way, as Hamilton and Zufiaurre (2013) point out, to speak in terms of “educational systems” is to speak instead about school; and when we use terms such as “educational systems,” instead of “school,” we pretend we are referring to something complex, even when we in fact are not. Metaphor lulls us into complacency, into insufficient and inadequate comparisons that are at best superficial and inaccurate, and at worst treacherous and unpredictable.

Metaphor and metonymy

Here, I would like to momentarily consider the difference between metaphor and metonymy, since their effects are not identical and as such may offer a pair of devices through which to consider their various operations. In the first case, metaphor is at base a comparison of two things, of objects of inquiry that assume a level playing field upon which similar yet distinct ideas are interchangeable. Metaphor produces school and education as mutually applicable terms, even when they are not. In the latter instance, metonym, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 36), “has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another” (original emphasis). Thus “education” is an attribute of school; that is, one assumes that attendance at school, indeed the physical embodiment of school, results in a form of education (although a highly proscriptive form). However, in metonymy this relationship is not commutative; that is, “school” is not an attribute of education, in that one can have an education without ever setting foot in a school; but education, as an attribute of school, can therefore be meant to stand for school – a highly problematic arrangement, as this paper will demonstrate.

This is not to suggest that metaphor and metonymy are exclusive concepts. On the contrary, they often overlap, can be deployed simultaneously to varying degrees, and operate in ways that produce effects that complement the other. For the purposes of this paper, though, it is worthwhile to consider the problem with TED or AERA, for instance, as the effects of the metonymy of these terms is that “anyone who is not equipped with a rigorous art of interpretation finds that reading the text leads to multiple ‘misconstructions’” (Kofman, 1993: 99). In this sense, we are woefully equipped to enter into a dialogue of education when we are caught in the bright lights of schooling as a proper or referent, or as a pair of binary concepts in and of themselves.

The use of metaphor, it should be noted, is not negative; rather, it serves as a productive exercise, in that it allows us to speak of the world not as it is, necessarily, but as it is seen and consequently produced. As Bredeek (1992: 28) puts it, “the boundaries between forms of discourse are conceived of as anything but permanent and inflexible.” Thus, the effects of the shifting nature of the metaphoric deployment of terms (such as “education” and “school”) should be considered, as this organic flexibility implies a particular productive social use. Yet this approach is also unavoidably proscriptive, as it requires us to construct
our impressions of the world narrowly; in other words, to speak metaphorically allows one
“to express only man’s relations to things, not the things themselves” (Kofman, 1993: 40).
We are therefore able to produce reality, but it is a reality of metaphorical language,
according to Nietzsche (1979: 83), “which correspond[s] in no way to the original entities.”
Metaphors, in other words, allow us to speak of the world, but not to accurately describe it
or know it. Put a different way, Gray (2013: 145) argues “The world is not a creation of
language, but something that ... escapes language.”

As such, we can know only in relation to metaphorical reasoning, and as a result we
mistake that logic as the construction of ‘truth,’ or, as Nietzsche (1979: 149) puts it,
“There is no ‘real’ expression and no real knowing apart from metaphor. But deception on
this point remains, i.e. the belief in a truth of sense impressions” (original emphasis).
The danger of trafficking in metaphors therefore occurs when we move from positions of
contingency to those of unity, of a subsuming of difference through metaphorical “truth”
telling. But we have no choice, since we are only able to use metaphorical language to speak of
things as we see them; and since that is the case, we must take care to remember that,
“A system must be evaluated not according to its truth, but according to its force and
beauty ... The deliberate use of metaphors affirms life” (Kofman, 1993: 19).

Nietzsche’s analysis of metaphor takes as its starting point the ways in which metaphor
moves us further and further away from what he refers to as “the music of the world,” as
part of the eternal (symbiotic) conflict between Dionysus and Apollo, music and lyrics.
In his case against Wagner, Nietzsche takes Wagner to task for demoting his music to
the trajectories and vagaries of his lyrics. In this way, “Anyone claiming to illustrate a
poem musically by subordinating the music to the text is wrongly privileging a crude met-
aphor, privileging metaphor in relation to the proper ... the Apollonian world cannot
produce the sound to symbolize the Dionysian sphere” (Kofman, 1993: 9). That is, we
can only speak, in an Apollonian sense, of the world, but that language can never accurately
describe the music of the world in a way that speaks to it truths or essences.

For the purposes of this paper, we can speak metaphorically here and extend this dynam-
ic to our discussion of education and school, wherein education, as an idea writ large, stands
in as the music, of knowing, of pedagogy; while school serves as the lyrics, overtaking the
harmonies of educational processes and purposes. Illich (1971: 107) also picks up on this
theme when he notes “Only the harp and Apollo’s lyre would be permitted in towns because
their harmony alone creates ‘the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom ...’ City-
dwellers panicked before Pan’s flute and its power to awaken the instincts.” And so, by
attempting to analogize education and school, to allow this metaphorical construction to
move from a similarity to a unitary concept (wherein education and school are the same
thing), we can hear almost exclusively only the Apollonian lyrics, while at the same time we
have begun to forget the tune.

It is here, at this forgetting, where metaphor begins to pose a danger to us, for it
necessitates that we engage in a collective amnesia that distances us from the essence of
the world, from its music, by focusing solely on the words and logic of language. Indeed,
speaking of a thing precipitates a process by which we inexorably distance ourselves from
the actual thing, and we engage in the construction of the idea (or competing ideas) of the
thing instead. This process of forgetting importantly is at the very heart of metaphorical
thinking, such that “The forgetting of metaphor does not occur at a specific point in time –
after a certain time – and it does not simply apply with respect to and because of the
concept. It is originary, the necessary correlate of metaphorical activity itself.” (Kofman,
When we engage in the production of the concept (such as, for example, education), we do so with no anchoring of that concept in its own truths; rather, we produce those truths – or, more accurately, our attempts at defining the concept become its accepted truths, and we separate ourselves and our knowing almost completely from the essence of the very concept we have named.

In other words, language, according to Mauthner, “point[s] to something (not a thing in any ordinary sense) that cannot be expressed in words . . . If only that is real which can be captured in language” then concepts, including metaphors, metonyms, and the like, are unreal: “So are all general terms including ‘matter’ and ‘humanity’ – abstractions that have featured in the catechisms of unbelief” (Gray, 2013: 145). The idea that school and education are somehow, even commutatively, in themselves real falls into this abyss of catechistic thinking, and, more importantly and more dangerously, a catechism of deployment that ignores effects.

As Kofman (1993: 43) explains, “Metaphorical activity, always already ‘forgotten’, is secondarily repressed by being deliberately abandoned in favour of the concept, of logic and science. It is as if there is an anticathexis of the originary forgetting by the creation of a ‘social memory’ which goes hand in hand with the creation of responsibility, selfconsciousness, and moral conscience.” Thus, the public discourses on “education” as a metaphor for school, and more perniciously as the non-commutative metonym, continue to produce layers of forgetting of the concept in and of itself. We speak in generalities of “education,” for instance, while at the same time forgetting the founding of the concept, thereby producing the conditions that allow us to “naturally” assume that education can be captured by the metaphor of school.

What is more, we then invert that genesis, so that it is school that becomes the founding idea of education, and not the other way around. Metaphor is clever in that it flips the order of operations around on us while we are busy paying attention only to the logic of the language, the lyrics. In terms of causality, then, “the schemata of causality is [sic] used to constitute the concept as a cause that explains the diversity it encloses in its unity” (Kofman, 1993: 38). School thereby becomes the cause of educations, and in this way, affirms the non-commutative property of metonymy, such that metonymy designates a being based on one of its characteristics, but does not get to Nietzsche’s “originary entities.” It is the enclosure of difference through unity by which metaphor forgets an “essence” and instead privileges the concept. Hence, education by necessity becomes an attribute of school, but the reverse is not always (or ever) the case.

And so, once we have forgotten through the construction of the metaphor, that metaphor then becomes, in Nietzsche’s term, a “proper” through the process of forgetting, as memory begins to move away from the music of the world. This creation of a “proper” is, by its very nature, a violent act: “the metamorphosis of the metaphor into a ‘proper’ implies relations of violence, and transformations in the relations of force” (Kofman, 1993: 43). To become a proper, a metaphor must assume its own causality and forget the thing itself. The essence of the concept as a proper then itself is lost, as the proper creates its own essence; all else in relation to the proper is then, in contrast, defined as “improper,” or else becomes contingent and contestable. Our attempts at describing the world, let alone knowing it, here become acts of futility, as the exponential use of metaphor, of linking disparate concepts as identical, results ever more in our inability to accurately describe the proper, and we are left with inadequate delineations. Kofman (1993: 14) clarifies that “Metaphor is linked to the loss of the ‘proper’ understood as the ‘essence’ of the world, which is indecipherable and
of which man can have only representations which are quite ‘improper’… Neither the ‘representations’ nor the symbolic languages are equivalent to one another.” Yet through metaphor we continue to pretend that we can both know and describe the proper; and in doing so we transform the metaphor itself into the proper, making both the referent and the representation unknowable.

Once we have replaced “a proper” with “the proper” of the metaphor, the question becomes one of expression, for metaphor itself requires a specific type of language. In Nietzsche’s estimation, the most effective, and ugly, language of metaphor is that of science. Thus, as the most pernicious metaphor, “the language of science distances itself further and further from the ‘music of the world’, from a ‘natural language’ which might name things ‘properly’ as God did on the day of creation” (Kofman, 1993: 65). This leads to the scientization of “education” in the service of school, in the use of metrics to “prove” the art of educating, for example – in the service of the concept, not of essence. “School” operates metaphorically precisely because it is so desperate to align itself with science. And it is through the development and fluency of this language of science that school has been able to inflect a forgetting, of the violence of “the proper” among other effects, in a multiplicity of contexts.

It is therefore not a matter of opposing these terms (school and education) but rather of remembering that they are different – that metonymic effects are founded in their forgetting, and in their subsequent equivalence. And our struggles to make them the same, to hold fast to forgetting, elide the monumental importance of that difference – of remembering. Indeed, the irony is that their metaphoricity has been so normalized by precisely those who seek in other contexts to differentiate (and, more specifically, decolonize). It is instructive here to briefly consider three cases from an ostensibly decolonizing context, and the ways in which metaphor and metonym operate.

**Three metonymic case studies**

**Education management**

To begin, let us take the instance of Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), an educational consulting arm of the US Department of Education working in conjunction with the Institute of Education Sciences (itself a problematic construction). In February 2016, McREL (Cicchinelli et al., 2016) issued a report on Yap State in the Federated States of Micronesia titled “Benchmarking the state of Yap’s education management information system,” which provided, among other things, an assessment of how “effective” Yap’s public-school system has been at collecting, analyzing, and disseminating “education” statistics. The assumption here is that “education management” means analyzing metrics used to measure the performance of Yapese students in school. Yet it is telling that McREL does not use the phrase “school management information system,” for that implies something less complex, something that otherwise, under the rubric of “education,” includes processes of knowing, pedagogy, and curricular decision-making.

Using our formula of non-commutativity, wherein education becomes an attribute of schooling (but not the other way around), we see that “education management” is intended metaphorically to mean something more than schooling metrics, but what that is becomes subsumed under the operation of the metonym. That is, education and education management remain vague, amorphous terms, but terms that are simultaneously captured by the
discourses of science and neoliberalism (Baez and Boyles, 2009; Ball, 2012). The focus of the report on quality, accuracy, and the managerialism of statistical reasoning suggests an “education” that is in fact rather narrow and prescribed: an education that is rooted in efficiency and the necessity of scientific measures. In the rush to unity and the disfiguring language of science, all spaces for potential decolonizations are crushed, as they are similarly under the obnoxious rubric of neoliberal metaphors of “best practices” or “what works” in “education” (Ball, 2016).

Nowhere, however, is it implied, assumed, or suggested that Yap’s “education management information system” has anything to do with indigenous ways of knowing, being, or constructing reality: in short, there is no way of allowing “education” to mean anything related to Yap itself. “Education” is removed from processes and purposes of knowing in indigenous contexts, and those contexts thus become contingent when confronted with the metaphorical deployment of “education” to mean neoliberal systems of governing information and data.

By no means does McREL intend to legitimize indigenous ways of knowing and being. On the contrary, the use of “education” here to mean “school” quite deliberately forecloses on alternative conceptions of how “education” might be deployed, and the linking of the term with “management information systems” ascribes to neoliberal surveillance practices a legitimacy that is assumed to attach itself to “education” in terms of a process that is not available if “school” had been deployed instead. There is thus a double-forgetting: first, of the difference between schooling and education; and second, of “education” to mean some sort of universal, non-contingent, neutral process whereby various epistemologies and educations are erased in the social imaginary.

School as indigenous

So, what of this disconnection between “education” as universal and “education” as contextual and decolonizing, in the sense that we legitimize autochthonous educations as the root of knowledge rather than a branch of knowledge? Here I bring in the example of the forgetting of difference through metaphor as normalization, specifically a banner that was displayed prominently at a recent exhibition of Oceanic “culture” on display at the Honolulu Museum of Art School:

In the Marshall Islands, there are many stories of brothers Rongerik and Rongelap. Rongerik worked hard to learn skills about fishing, canoe building, and being a leader from his father, Chief Paluelap. This discipline and commitment to his education led Rongerik to be respected from [sic] his family and wider island community. Today these forms of educational practices, such as master–apprentice relationships, still function as educational tools and markers of esteem for young Islanders. Even though cultural traditions are important means of learning, Western educational institutions are also significant to us Micronesians.

Here we see a number of effects on display. First, there is the use of the term “education” to mean “cultural traditions” and indigenous ways of knowing, albeit in the past tense (as noted in the use of the term “tradition”). There is also the equivalence of Marshallese “traditional” education with contemporary notions of “working hard” and lifelong learning, as evidenced by Rongerik’s “discipline and commitment to his education.” Finally, there is
the complete conflation of “traditional” education with “Western educational institutions” – or, schools, which are purportedly also of importance in Micronesia.

What is so problematic about this last point is that it exposes the violence of normalizing “education” and using it as a stand-in for school – again, as part of the noncommutative property of metonymy. To suggest that culture, tradition, and indigenous “education” are synonymous – and, moreover, of the same import – with Western schooling privileges schooling in a way that denies an essence, and indeed even a difference of legitimacy, to indigenous educations. More dangerous is the way in which this privileging depends upon a forgetting of the histories of colonizing that imposed schooling on Oceanic societies in the first place. As Kofman (1993: 46) writes, “only the result is preserved, while the process of genesis is hidden” – thus, when indigenous societies “reclaim” school (or make equivalences with indigenous processes of “education”), the process of colonization – the genesis of the concept – is hidden and forgotten. School thus becomes “natural” and “neutral”: “The object of ‘memory’ is to make us forget life; the order of concepts seeks to give the illusion that becoming and difference are degradations of an a priori world, a ‘real and true’ world” (Kofman, 1993: 48). Metaphorical equivalence therefore “seeks to establish an equilibrium between more or less equal powers, and to force everyone else to accept” (Kofman, 1993: 44).

Behold the violence of colonization and the metaphorical use of “educational institutions” to mean schools, foreclosing on indigenous notions of “education.” To deploy the metonymic effects of schooling in this instance assumes that colonization is somehow benign, and takes place in a field of balances of power, thereby erasing the very notions of power operations that make colonizing and its effects possible in the first place. The metonymic effects of these terms foreclose on possibilities for decolonizing thoughts and spaces, as we are forever conflating the assumptions behind these words while simultaneously forgetting them in favor of a metaphorical unity.

Metaphor as untranslatable

In a final example, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) recently changed the name of the Ministry of Education to the Public School System. This move, curiously enough, creates a space for a more accurate rendering of meanings, as it deliberately separates out the school system, characterized as it is by the American model of schooling designed to replace indigenous ways of knowing and being, from a ministry that had been focused exclusively on schooling, rather than on “education.” In effect, the RMI has opened up the possibility for multiple interpretations of “education” by distancing it from the effects of metonymic deployment. As a matter of fact, one can be excused for wondering what the portfolio of the Minister of Education currently is, other than to monitor the performance of the newly minted Superintendent of Schools. The minister is in effect in charge of a ministry that no longer exists, but at the same time suggests a multiplicity of possible alternatives should he decide to take on his title with any deliberation.

And it is this space of confusion that importantly begs the question of what we are to make of metaphorical language in translation, for there is a purposive distinction in the use (although not necessarily the “meaning”) of the Marshallese word jelalokjen, which is often glossed to mean “education,” and jikuul, which is a Marshallese pronunciation of the word “school.” Jelalokjen, rather than being reduced to “education,” encompasses a variety of processes and purposes, as its component parts (jela, “to know”; lok, “more”; and ijen,
“place”) suggest not that it is a “place to know more,” but rather a space in which knowing and the production of knowledge realize no boundaries and embody no proscriptions. The mistake one can easily make is to suggest that jelalokjen, as merely a “place to know more,” sounds a lot like a school . . . but it is decidedly not meant, in Marshallse, to denote school, or jikuul, nor is it ever used as a synonym, and more importantly these terms are not used metaphorically. A student, for instance, is referred to as ri-jikuul (ri being glossed as “person,” thus a “person of school”); but there is no such subjectivity as ri-jelalokjen.

As Gray (2013: 144) writes of Mauthner, he “wanted to loosen the hold of words on the mind. Rather than struggling to silence the impulse to move beyond words [which is what we engage in when we use metonyms lazily and deny their effects], he wanted to follow the impulse wherever it led.” We cannot then use these terms in the vernacular as metaphors, as they do not operate that way in the imaginary of the language. Rather, they lead us to potentially new reticulations of pedagogy and meaning.

The ways in which the English equivalents of these terms are used, however, is another story. And that is what makes the change from the Ministry of Education to the Public School System so compelling. Kofman (1993: 112–113) reminds us that “Metaphorical style is ‘aristocratic’; it allows those of the same race to recognize each other and excludes the man of the herd as unclean, foul-smelling: to use common speech is to become vulgar.”

This is the crux of colonization and language, and the metaphorical language of schooling in colonized (and continually colonizing) contexts. Education, in its various iterations, is foreclosed upon and confused with something decidedly nonnative. And yet here we have an example in which that distinction is clearly delineated: there is the colonial, American school system, where there is no confusion or metaphorical sleight of hand; and there is this other notion, jelalokjen, a multiplicity of possible educations, that is reserved and separated out from a metaphorical proper.

Conclusion: when education is not school

In order to consider alternatives to the metaphorical relationship between education and school, I will conclude with a brief visit with Dr. Seuss. Seuss (posthumously, and with the help of a second author and second illustrator), in Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! tells the story of Diffendoofer School in Dinkerville, wherein students learn things such as yelling, tying knots, putting saddles on leopards, helping pigs put on underpants, and so on (Seuss et al., 1998). The narrator, a student at the school, raves about his teacher, Miss Bonkers, whom he describes by rhyming: “Of all the teachers in our school, /I like Miss Bonkers best. /Our teachers are all different, /but she’s different-er than the rest” (original emphasis). It is this difference that will soon play a pivotal role, both in the plot of the story as well as in our analysis of metaphorical reasoning.

The principal, Mr. Lowe, is not nearly as ebullient as Miss Bonkers or the other teachers, presumably because he is concerned not with teaching but with bureaucracy and other administrivia. He is portrayed as very nervous and anxious about the students’ performance in the school; so, it is no surprise when one day he announces that the school will soon be assessed based on a standardized test. As Mr. Lowe explains, “All schools for miles and miles around/Must take a special test, /To see who’s learning such and such –/To see which school’s the best.” Despite being written before the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001, the story predicts and indeed names what was already active in the public discourse, namely testing as the most (or only) legitimate form of assessment. What is more,
it also presages the consequences of that high-stakes testing, later codified in NCLB, with the threat of school closure: “If our small school does not do well, /Then it will be torn down, /And you will have to go to school/In dreary Flobbertown.” Flobbertown, of course, is the inverse of Dinkerville – students all dress the same, act the same, learn the same, in effect are the same. It is so bad that “Their lunches have no taste at all, /Their dogs are scared to bark.”

On test day, the students, including the narrator, are understandably anxious, as is Mr. Lowe. Miss Bonkers, however, strikes a note of optimism. She cheers the students on by reminding them: “You’ve learned the things you need/To pass that test and many more–/I’m certain you’ll succeed. /We’ve taught you that the earth is round, /That red and white make pink, /And something else that matters more–/We’ve taught you how to think.” In the end, the students ace the test, and Diffendoofer School is saved. The narrator explains about the test “For it was filled with all the things/That we all knew (original emphasis).

Here it is instructive to heed Nietzsche’s admonition about the productive qualities of metaphor, in that it “indeed expresses a ‘proper’, but one which is provisional and multiple” (Kofman, 1993: 102). In this way, we can see the ways in which Dr. Seuss teases out various distinctions in the metaphorical language embodying both education and school. In the first instance, Diffendoofer School, while labeled as such, is shown to be a different type of school; and in fact, that difference suggests that it is not a school – or, a “proper” school – in the sense that we would be able to otherwise speak of school. There is a curriculum, more or less, and there are pedagogies at work, but the key idea here is that it is different – and it does not try to flatten, subsume, or generalize that difference, the way that “school” as a “proper” does when deployed metaphorically. In this way the story seems to suggest that Diffendoofer School is not, in fact, a school at all – rather, it is something else, in that it operates as a stand-in for education, thereby inverting the non-commutative property of metonymy. The “school,” properly speaking, is embodied by Flobbertown, a context of dread and monotony that we are all too familiar with.

It is also important to note that the students are able to pass the test precisely because they have not been schooled, in that the content is contingent and therefore not really of very much importance, but rather because they have been educated, at least in terms of knowing “how to think.” The implication here is that one should be able to pass a variety of tests, if one has to, regardless of what the content of those tests are on their face. Thus, Diffendoofer School (which I argue is not a school in the metaphorical sense) returns us to Hamilton and Zufiaurre’s (2013) call to remember the purposiveness of educations, in a multiplicity of forms, an act that requires us to upend the forgetting of metaphor and the construction of the proper and instead return not to education’s “origins” but to its effects. Indeed, this variety of alternatives is itself demonstrated by Diffendoofer School, wherein each teacher teaches in a unique way a set of content that is as impractical as it is contingent, and contrasted with Flobbertown, wherein everything and everyone is the same.

Learning, and alternative connotations of the “proper” of education, is based not on the merits of the information being imparted, but rather on the ways in which that form of learning is produced and utilized. In the end, we need to take care about what we mean and what our purposes are when deploying either “school” or “education” in the social imaginary. They may in fact mean the same thing at times; but most of the time, they do not. It is when they do not that their liaisons – and their effects – become dangerous.
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