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Metonymies, metaphors and/or language reconsiderations for sustainability during COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Pandemic discussions employ language metaphors and metonymies to make sense of the coronavirus disease 2019 crisis. From commenting and proposing to revise terms such as social distancing, the war against the virus, to viewing mother nature as a killer, there are language reconsiderations to be made to avoid some disturbing mental imageries to picture a sustainable future. The Anthropocene geologic time and the improved environmental quality situate this backdrop. Language interventions make up as a vanishing mediation that will prompt a deeper understanding of the environment and nature as a whole.

Keywords Anthropocene, language, nature, sustainability, vanishing mediator

The nexus that ties the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the environment pertains to the connection of deep ecological traces in nature. How 'deep' these traces are can only be ascribed to proximal environmental failures—or the inability of humans to pose direct contact or communication with nature. That being said, language employs metaphors and metonymies to address this indirectness in a way that accommodates a coherent picture. There are lots of those during the pandemic, starting with the assertion that the effects of our actions during the previous year have led to some considerable 'collateral damages'[1,2]—terms used to military contexts of war that are now used as metonymies for consequences, especially long-term ones. Though the terms do not necessarily evoke a metaphor of war, the World Emergency COVID-19 Ethics (WeCope) Committee has recommended that the use of war metaphors should be avoided because 'it risks transforming preventive public health procedures into instruments of social control'.[3] For example, while gas masks in warfare are used as a defense against an enemy, face masks are used as an act of love to protect others. During the early stages of quarantine and lockdown protocols, there were proposals to change the 'social' metaphor of distancing into literal 'physical' distancing, owing to mental health considerations.[4] This metaphor of social control reflects Foucault's description of medieval plague towns with 'segmented, immobile, frozen' spaces, in fixed locations that connote movement as a risk to a person's 'life, contagion or punishment'.[5] The historical usage of the term 'social distancing', however, is not just to sound like metaphorically ending the 'social' dimension of a person's life but really is about intending to end it.[6] But the implementation of the term finds realistic difficulties in cramped spaces during natural disasters.[7] And this is where connections to nature metaphors or metonymies play their role.

The metonymic role ascribed to nature has been that of attaching the metaphor of a mother. 'Mother Nature' persists as the metonymy of life-giving, care and sustenance of the environment. The era of Anthropocene, however, challenges this.[8] First, human activity made it possible for ecological sustenance difficult to keep up. Second, it is not that mother nature is no longer stable due to human activities, but that mother nature herself was unstable from the start through inherent climatic changes. The language considerations of pointing to mother nature here resonate with the indirect links of the pandemic, but it can provide direct messages for sustainable prospects. Hence, 'while there is no direct evidence that this pandemic is a result of human actions with respect to the earth, ample evidence exists that deforestation and other environmental changes, together with climate change, do make it more likely that viruses will cross from

wildlife to humans'.[9] The message, it seems, in retaining the mother nature metonymy as somehow indirectly related to the pandemic crisis is that she is responsible, no matter that this may come as a reaction to constant human interventions. The disturbing metaphor of this pandemic is that of viewing the deaths as mother nature's way of depopulation, which is tied to Malthusian elements of thought.[10] Language caution should be made in this regard because if pushed to the extreme, this can mean that mother nature is the murderer of all this albeit indirectly. Conversely, the metaphor that 'humans are the virus' also creates some disturbing ramifications, as humans despite misanthropic justifications can mediate this experience. The positive aspect is that the environmental quality of living is better and may lead to low mortality rates.[11] The benefits of improved environmental quality during the pandemic as found in the reduced carbon footprint in the suspension of flights and elimination of all kinds of pollution (e.g. air, noise, water) must not be treated as a triumph in 'combatting' viral—or human, to use the metaphor—infection. Rather than merely describing this experience as temporary[12] or paradoxical,[13] it can be viewed as a prescriptive vanishing mediation[14] that emancipates[15] reconsiderations for a totally sustainable future.

Through such language considerations, COVID-19 can be a mediation that provides learning opportunities to address climate change through sustainability. These emphasize recommendations[16] on regulatory authorities, government bodies and the corporate sector to enhance environmental sustainability. These comprise (i) adoption of green and eco-friendly practices, (ii) awareness programs through workshops, (iii) promote green projects by tax-exempting enterprises with renewable energy, (iv) penalties, conversely, on polluting firms and (v) increase prices for non-green energy and fossil fuel. Finally, mother nature might be unstable but the adaption of sustainable futures largely depends on whether our actions attempt to more understand our environments. Deep ecological factors, therefore, mean not subscribing to mother nature as *Medea* who kills her own children, saved only by a *Deus ex machina* ('God from a machine') as metaphorical or possible metonymical adaptation through vaccines and vaccine production. 'Mother nature' can instead mean a renewed and more profound connection with the earth as a symbiotic beginning and end of human life.

Acknowledgments

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