

Verbal and Nonverbal Metaphor

ASA ITO

It is impossible for other people to experience your disability, but metaphors can help us to convey our feelings in verbal or nonverbal forms. Metaphors are devices to connect and merge different bodies that cannot be combined in essence. The purpose of this chapter is to describe a variety of examples of metaphor that allow people to meet their own body as well as others', and to clarify the practical meaning of metaphor as a technique for bodily communication.

The first section is about metaphors to understand one's own body and to illuminate differences in the subjective experiences of people who stutter. The second section discusses metaphors to meet other's bodies, using the example of the "cultural ears" of those born deaf and the coappreciation of artworks by sighted and visually impaired people. The last section deals with nonverbal metaphor through the example of the Sports Guide without Sight project.

1. Metaphor to Understand One's Own Body

There are many natural metaphors in crip communities. The following three metaphors are used by those who stutter. Stuttering is a reality we all experience, but each expression has a different emphasis.

The first example comes from a woman who speaks repetitively. She compares her body to a trembling fruit jelly: "When I repeat words, time seems to move slowly. I feel myself opening the container of trembling fruit jelly with great care and attention, which enables me to avoid stuttering blocks" (Aya Watanabe).

Her attentiveness to pronouncing a word is compared to the care needed to open the container of trembling fruity jelly without spilling it out. Her body easily gets out of control because of how unstable it is. For her, stuttering blocks are the worst, so she tries to avoid them by releasing her jiggly body. Meanwhile, her body seems to be dancing and trying to escape.

Another woman says her body is much stiffer: "When I speak in public, I get rigid and stop breathing, which seems to destroy the vital activity of my cells. My body feels like stone or ice. . . . I am horrified like I am at the end of the earth alone" (Naomi Takayama).

She describes how she feels when she cannot make her words come out of her mouth in front of other people. While Watanabe's main symptom is a repetition

of parts of words, Takayama's body becomes dry, hard, and cold. Similar feelings of being apart from the world are prevalent in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, a famous piece of Japanese literature by Yukio Mishima.

As a final example of metaphor, a man who uses the technique of switching words often to avoid stuttering blocks offers a metaphor regarding stuttering. For instance, if he wanted to say "water," he used a word with a similar meaning—say, "bottle." He explains, "Whenever I speak, I notice 'that guy' is approaching me like 'here, here, here comes the block!' As a child, I could not help but bump into it. Now I can avoid it from any side, which allows me to have room in my mind" (Chen Dominique).

He uses playful language to describe his technique to cope with stuttering. To avoid a threat that may put his life in danger, he jumps off the road and alters his course as if he were playing a video game. Because he has seen blocks knock him down over and over again, he is skilled at playing the game of stuttering.

A beautiful metaphor can help to illuminate people's subjective experiences with disabilities. In these examples, stuttering demonstrates that even those who are supposed to belong to the same disability community can have different experiences of disability. These subjective sensations are shaped by metaphors based on their recognition of or attitude toward the disability. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, it is our physical experiences that generate metaphorical expressions, and a metaphor can only have meaning when it is related to physical reality: "In actuality, we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis" (1980, 23). Though these authors are strongly ableist in the sense that they assume our physical experiences are universal, their approach to metaphors from a cognitive perspective is still significant. By utilizing metaphors, we can express how we perceive things differently depending on how we feel.

Metaphors that fit crip experiences are important for two reasons. The first is that they allow us to compete with the dominant ableist language. Disability studies has criticized the use of several metaphors that contain disability expressions fostering a pejorative view of people with disabilities. As an example, people often convey the belief that visually impaired people are incapable of understanding beauty or truth when they say things like "She's blind to nature's beauty." If we have an inspiring metaphor to express the richness of the world without sight, it will help us refrain from presupposing ability based on a common cliché.

Another reason such metaphors are important is that they allow us to cultivate more precise language about crip experiences. Liz Crow highlights that in the social model of disability, we tend to avoid focusing on the diverse experiences of our bodies: "External disabling barriers may create social and economic disadvantage but our subjective experience of our bodies is also an integral part of our everyday reality. What we need is to find a way to integrate impairment

into our whole experience and sense of ourselves for the sake of our own physical and emotional well-being, and, subsequently, for our individual and collective capacity to work against disability” (2014, 359–361).

In 1976 Gen-yu-kai, a Japanese stuttering association, published the *Declaration for People Who Stutter*. In it, people who stutter are encouraged to live with stuttering as a social normality. People who stutter, however, are not homogeneous, and they have a delicate nuance about them. As the declaration notes, some people choose to stutter in public, but others hide their impairment by using techniques like switching words so people will not recognize them as someone who stutters. The social model is indispensable, but we must compensate for it with nuanced language to take account of the diversity of subjective experiences and needs.

2. Metaphor to Understand Another's Body

Crip metaphor is a fundamental tool to describe our personal bodily experiences. This does not mean that certain metaphors must only be used by those whose bodies are qualified to use them. The general public should be able to access crip metaphors, regardless of their lack of experience with the reality on which they are based. In the same way, people with disabilities should be able to use expressions whose physical basis is unfamiliar to them.

Occasionally, people with disabilities are irritated by the issue of the “right to use certain expressions.” Georgina Kleege, who is legally blind, describes the reaction her friend had when she used visual expressions:

I was talking about a book I was reading and a friend said, “Don’t you mean listening to? Don’t you mean you were listening to the book on tape?”

Of course, this was literally true; generally speaking, I do most of my reading aurally. But I’m not going to say, “I’m listening to such-and-such a book on tape,” or “I scanned such-and-such a book into my computer so I could use its synthesized voice” when all I mean is that I am reading it. To specify the mode of access I happen to be employing implies that I have something to say about the particular mode, that the fact that I was listening to it (or touching it in Braille for that matter) significantly alters my understanding of it. Occasionally this could be true, I suppose. Mostly it’s not.

It’s like I’m not going to say, “Later I will be in close proximity to you” instead of “See you later.” How literal-minded can people be? (2006, 103)

As this example reminds us, sticking to precise expressions that exactly match the features of a speaker’s body can cause a practical and ethical problem. If a visually impaired person said, “I will be in close proximity to you,” we would be confused. Moreover, if they are forced to say such things, this means they are

being excluded from mainstream culture. A language is a form of media. We chose certain expressions not only because they are fitting to our bodies and allowed but also because they are understandable in a particular situation.

Language is ambiguous. A word can be used literally or metaphorically depending on who uses the word. This ambiguity can indeed mask the differences in our bodies if we ignore the gap those who use that word metaphorically may feel. However, if we are conscious and creative in our use of language, this bilateral nature of words can be a way to meet each other's bodies. When hearing a speaker in this common space that includes many bodies, a mutual penetration may occur when the listener tries to understand the reality of the speaker that his or her body cannot experience directly.

Penetration can be found in a wide range of communication fields. This first example is from Tomotake Kinoshita, a researcher who was born deaf. His essay "Survival by Myself" describes the layered experience of walking through beautiful woods. He felt as if he was borrowing others' bodies while under the trees:

While walking through the mixed forest of the park and arriving among the woods, a phrase of Musashino [a famous essay on nature in Musashino, a suburb of Tokyo, written by Doppo Kunikida in 1898] happens to occur to me. . . . Beyond the distance of 120 years, I heard the sound written in Musashino. Doppo's apprehension of Musashino as a sum of sensations that came from his various senses such as sight, hearing, and touching, which he had when he was walking there, was built inside me. Then I realized that I was accompanied by someone though I was standing alone in the grove. . . .

By borrowing Doppo's apprehension, I listen to the sound, which fills the mixed forest. This ability to borrow others' apprehension has something to do with the fact that I am deaf. People with physical impairments have the hidden ability to borrow others' bodies with ease because they are lacking in certain functions. (2019, 208–226)

In contrast to physiological ears, we might call Kinoshita's borrowed sense of hearing "cultural ears" or "acquired ears." Because he cannot hear any sounds physiologically, he has learned how it feels to hear sounds in certain situations through the description of sounds in literature. He can imagine the sounds of woods as vividly as if he actually hears them. It might help him "feel" it since sound is a kind of vibration that is familiar to deaf people. In addition to being symbols, words are also media that connect different bodies beyond time and space. Through reading or listening, one can penetrate the body of another. The boundaries between bodies are blurred.

Another example of borrowing another's body can be found in a museum. With a special program held in various museums in Japan called Verbal Imaging Museum Tour with Visually Impaired People, the sighted and the visually

impaired can enjoy exploring artworks together. Attendees are divided into groups of about six people, including those who are visually impaired and those who are sighted. They discuss the assigned work with their team members. In this program, a visually impaired staff member facilitates the discussion. Each work is admired for about twenty minutes and then you hop on to the next. People never touch a work during the program, but they exchange words.

Traditionally, visually impaired people enjoy art by touching it. The museum offers a variety of programs specifically designed for those with visual impairments, including an opportunity to touch a three-dimensional model of a work of art or the work itself. This type of program may have the benefit of helping visually impaired individuals correctly perceive the physical features of the work. However, it is important to distinguish perception from appreciation. To perceive a work of art is to understand a physical aspect of it. On the other hand, to appreciate is to enjoy the aesthetic value of it and to develop your subjective impression. Touching objects and concentrating only on their physical aspects tends to prevent people from having such an aesthetic attitude.

This kind of tour is designed so that sighted people do not have to explain the work to blind people. Hayashi was the designer of the program and held it in many museums around Japan. "I always encourage the sighted participants to discuss two things," he said to me in an interview. The first thing you notice is the size of the painting, its color, its motif, and so on. It is all objective information. Then there are the invisible things: your thoughts, your memories, and your impressions. It is all subjective meaning. Whenever someone tells you to describe the subjective meaning, the conversation becomes filled with metaphors. It is possible for visually impaired people to hear contradictory metaphors as the discussion proceeds. The color of an abstract painting can be green like cedar leaves, sliced pickles in sandwiches, weird witch soup, and horrible zombies. Each participant's cultural and personal background is crucial to understanding these metaphors. The Verbal Imaging Museum Tour can be described as appreciation through others.

The visually impaired staff and participants are not passive listeners. As a result of hearing various impressions of the sighted, they may ask why they are reminded of witch soup or they may express their own interpretation. The nonphysical aspect of the work is important, so they are welcome to engage in the discussion. They can also deepen discussions because their point of view is sometimes unexpected to the sighted. This collaborative process of appreciation benefits from the gap of information and perspectives among participants. A blind man put it to me in an interview, "[The] Verbal Imaging Tour taught me that having sight does not always mean to be superior. Sight does not assure them of the correct answer. The sighted can be blind" (Kenji Shiratori).

Here, the words and the practice of seeing seem to lose their literal meaning. This concept should not be limited to its physiological and literal meanings but

should be extended to its cultural and metaphorical meanings. As metaphorically understood, seeing can be performed by people who cannot see physiologically. A disability can make us question the literal meaning of a word and make us redefine it.

3. Nonverbal Metaphor

The foregoing examples are evidence that beautiful metaphors can open common space for differently abled bodies where mutual penetration occurs due to its bilateral (literal and metaphorical) nature. Metaphors are more than just verbal, but we tend to use verbal ones. This section will shed light on nonverbal metaphors and see how the encounter and the mutual penetration of different bodies happen without using words.

Sports Guide without Sight is a collaboration between Junji Watanabe (Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation's Communication Science Laboratories), Akiko Hayashi (Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation's Service Evolution Laboratories), and me (Tokyo Institute of Technology) since 2018. This project began with the aim of developing a new approach for visually impaired people to enjoy sports games more vividly. However, our goal became the reproduction of the subjective experience of players using everyday tools such as towels that would be accessible to those with and without visual disabilities.

For visually impaired people, verbal live coverage of sports games has traditionally been an orthodox method of watching sporting events. As a flying ball travels through the sky, the commentator in a baseball stadium may describe the sharp line it draws against a blue sky with captivating narration. This type of verbal explanation is indeed popular and useful among visually impaired people, but some have complained that it is insufficient. There are primarily two problems.

One problem is that the verbal live coverage tends to be an explanation *ex post facto* of what is happening in the game. What excites spectators of soccer games is not the fact of scoring a goal but the process and the expectation leading up to it. However, verbal explanation takes too much time to catch up with the event. Some visually impaired people say they feel left behind amid the crowd in stadiums or sports bars because they cannot follow the course of events in detail.

The second problem relates to the quality of the information that words convey. It must be difficult to imagine what the athlete's jump was like when you hear "the athlete jumped." Did he jump like a cat without any preparation? Did he squat down and then jump high like a spring? This movement has infinite nuance but words cannot describe it all. People with visual impairments may be frustrated by the poor quality of the information.

Our first attempt to counter this weak verbal explanation was to translate judo into towel language using touch and vibrations (figure 22.1). It is a fairly

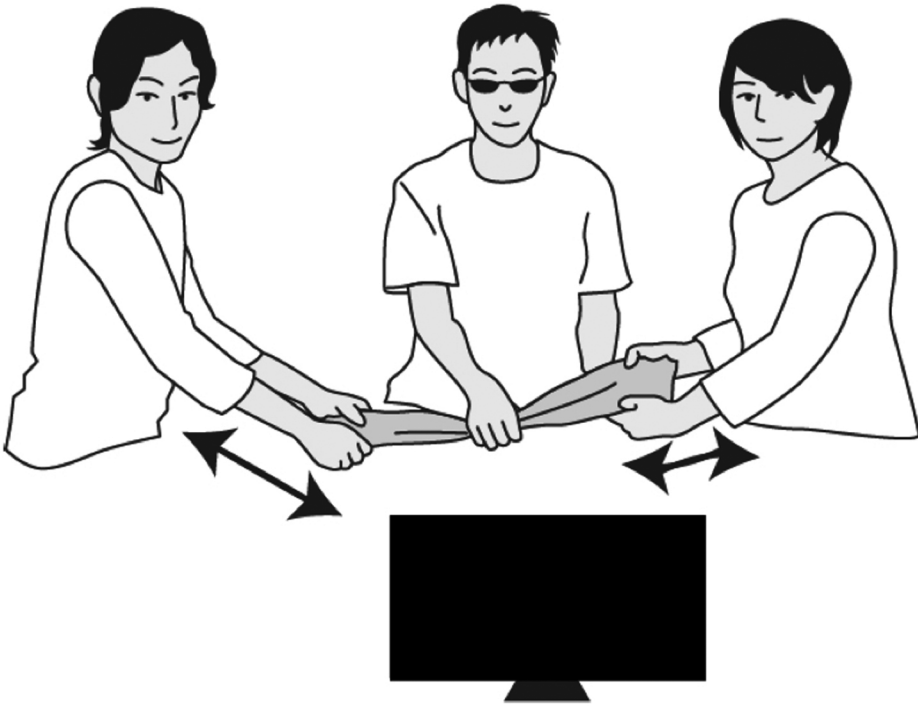


Figure 22.1. Translation of judo with a towel.

straightforward process. The blind spectator holds the center of a towel, which is held on each side by a sighted translator of each judo athlete. As the athletes move, the towel conveys the struggle and tactics of their movements to the spectators. A blind man claimed that he felt the thrill of live events as if he were part of the action. Although details of the sporting technique tend to be omitted, this method of translation is good for enjoying the excitement of the game.

Our experience reminded us of the importance of nonvisual aspects of sports games. We usually think of sports as something that can be seen, as evidenced by common phrases like “watching sports games.” However, when athletes play, they also use their auditory and haptic senses. We might be better able to enjoy sports games in a more empathetic way if we borrow the perspective of visually impaired people and take nonvisual aspects into account. That insight led us to develop the Sports Guide without Sight project.

To create a “sports guide without sight,” we interviewed athletes of twelve sports about the sensations they have during their games and tried to translate those using ordinary objects. Fencing players hold a foil lightly between their index finger and thumb. Wrist movements are crucial, as foils are very flexible. With trial and error, we found that entangled wooden blocks shaped like *C* and *H* were a suitable way to convey the sensation of engaging blades and



Figure 22.2. Translation of fencing with wooden blocks shaped like *C* and *H*.



Figure 22.3. Translation of baseball with a cord.

releasing to strike. Both players close their eyes as one attempts to wrest their block from the other (figure 22.2).

Additionally, such translated activities can convey a psychological aspect of the game. We tried to translate how a batter reads a pitcher's movements in baseball (figure 22.3). In the activity, both the pitcher and the batter close their eyes, and the pitcher pulls a cord. To read the pitcher's movements, the batter touches the pitcher's shoulder, and then grabs the cord. It is a home run if the batter grabs the red portion, it is a swing and miss if it is the black part, and it is a hit if it is the surrounding area.

The metaphor of touch takes us into the subjective experience of others that cannot be experienced literally. Despite not being trained as fencing players, we can experience the essence of what it is like to handle a foil. Although we have not mastered the skill of hitting, we can sense a pitcher's psychological tactics. Using nonverbal metaphors helps us see sports from the perspective of players and enables us to redefine what it means to watch sports.

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