

## Hunting for metaphors in **tlhIngan Hol**

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What relevance can identifying metaphors have for a student of tlhIngan Hol? Since Klingons tend to express themselves in a direct way such a pursuit might seem futile or worse, an insult: after all it can be taken to imply that speakers of Klingon do not always adhere to the ideals of accuracy and straightforwardness. Those who regard metaphors as anomalies may believe that outside literature and rhetoric such linguistic frivolities can only abound in languages favoring indirect ways of communicating. Federation Standard is a good case in point: on Earth it is not only plants that *take root*, so do ideas. Angry humans tend to *boil with rage* and it may take them a while to *simmer down*. Unhappy when *snowed under* with work, they may try to *kill time* if they have nothing to do. Curiously, speakers of English often talk of ideas as if they were food: they often need to *digest facts* in order to assess their significance and though as a rule they disapprove of *half-baked* ideas, they sometimes find it necessary to *cook up* a story.

Unlikely though it may seem, a closer examination reveals the presence of numerous metaphors in tlhIngan Hol too. Hungry warriors with little time to spare will head for the nearest restaurant where the food *hurries* (**moD Soj**; KGT, 102). In the unlikely event of being involved in a verbal rather than actual swordplay, they will *lunge and deflect* (**jop 'ej way'**, KGT, 115) and depending on their age and social status they will phrase their arguments using either *fresh language* (**Hol ghoQ**, KGT, 35) or *tired words* (**mu'mey Doy'**, KGT, 35). Being seen as foolish must be

anathema to Klingons because on Kronos not even *the wind respects the fool* (**qoH vuvbe' SuS**, TKW, 107).

What kind of benefits can be gained from studying metaphors in Klingon? An intriguing answer can be found in the book which served as the inspiration for this article and though the theory of metaphor presented by a linguist George Lakoff and a philosopher Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) pertains to human languages and mental processes it could, arguably, be applied to other humanoid species and their languages. The two language specialists take the view that metaphors pervade language because thought processes themselves are metaphorical in nature. In their book they attempt to demonstrate that far from being superfluous ornaments metaphors play a key role in how thought and language are structured. For instance, when thinking and talking about the concept of ARGUMENT, English speakers often borrow the concepts and vocabulary from the semantic area connected with WAR.

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point*  
in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

Since "the essence of the metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (L&J, 5), it can be argued that analyzing metaphors can give us some insight into how Klingons experience the world. In other words, it could bring us closer toward achieving the goal postulated by Marc Okrand and help

us "get inside the Klingon mind: to see what Klingons believe, how they think" (TKW, vi). While there is still not enough material to establish what 'metaphors Klingons live by,' the body of the canonical texts available is steadily growing and a few tentative conclusions can already be formulated.

In most discussions of the phenomenon, a distinction is made between two terms: **conceptual metaphor** and **linguistic metaphor**. The former refers to the connection that may exist between two semantic areas at the level of thought; for instance, between argument and war. By convention, conceptual metaphors are represented in writing by capital letters, i.e. ARGUMENT IS WAR. Linguistic metaphors, presented here in italics, are best described as written or spoken realizations of a conceptual metaphor. Only some conceptual and linguistic metaphors are shared by any two Terrestrial languages and it is probably reasonable to assume that in this respect there is even less similarity between Federation Standard and Klingon.

As could be expected, in the warrior tongue we find a lot of expressions connected with those aspects of life that Klingons value most: war and physical combat, music and cooking. Perhaps the most striking, though hardly surprising, feature of the Klingon language is the abundance of linguistic metaphors from the domain of war and fighting. Characteristically, Klingons do not take opportunities, they *capture* them (**Hoch 'ebmey tIjon**. TKW, 51). Before making a decision they consider it prudent to consider every *weapon* (**Hoch nuH qel**, KGT, 108) and in slang, making a mistake

amounts to *shooting* wrongly (**bachHa'**, KGT, 145). If Klingons are in agreement, they may acknowledge the fact by saying that they *hit one target* (**wa' DoS wIqIp**, KGT, 105). Difference of opinion will be seen as *hitting two, or scattered, targets* (**cha' DoSmey wIqIp / DoSmey wIqIp**, KGT, 106). Whatever task Klingons may embark on, they prefer to *focus on but one target* (**wa' DoS neH yIbuS**, TKW, 81). Most notably, WORDS ARE WEAPONS: when a Klingon engages in curse *warfare*, he attempts to *shoot* his curses forcefully (**pe'vII mu'qaDmey tIbach**, TKW, 148).

Likewise, it is not surprising to discover that a race proud of its cuisine thinks of many aspects of life in terms of food and cooking. Thus, for a Klingon revenge can be *served* like a *dish* (**bortaS blr jabluDI reH QaQqu' nay'**, TKW p. 133) and a warrior's blood may *boil* (**tujpa' qul pub SuvwI' 'Iw**, TKW p.32). The word '**ey**', used to show appreciation of both music and food, could suggest that for Klingons good music is *delicious* or, conversely, a well-prepared meal is *harmonious*.

The conceptual domains which typically feature in non-literal language include physical properties of environmental phenomena, such as fire, earth, water and ice, which are frequently applied to psychological states, ideas and activities. Thus humans with a *fiery* temper are easily *inflamed*, whereas *cold-hearted* individuals are recognized by their *icy* stares and *stony* faces. In Klingon, depending on the situation, a warrior's blood may be *hot* (**blrchugh qIvon tuj 'Iw**, TKW p. 174) or it can *grow cold* (**blrchoH SuvwI' 'Iw**, PK). Moreover, like English speakers, members of the imperial race sometimes order each other to *freeze*

or, to be more exact, *to be frozen* (**yItaD!** / **petaD!** KGT, 117). On Qo'noS it is not only the planet's crust that can *experience* tectonic tremors, the verb **Qom** (KGT, 161) can also describe ships in jeopardy and hazardous missions. Water metaphors are particularly common in English: a public institution on Earth can be *inundated* with petitions or requests, and governments are often concerned about security *leaks*, markets being *flooded* with imported goods or *waves* of terrorist attacks. Interestingly, despite numerous references to water in Klingon maxims and idioms, no water metaphors as such can be found in the existing corpus. Thus, in **tay'taHbe' 'Iw bIQ je** (TKW, 34) water is mentioned as a symbol of weakness and **bIQ ngaS Hlvje'** (KGT, 120) reflects the Klingon contempt for water as an inferior beverage. None of these sayings alludes to the actual properties of water as part of the natural world. As for the holiday proverb **matay'DI' vIHtaHbogh bIQ rur mu'qaDmey** (PK), it contains an explicit comparison, not a metaphor.

Most of the conceptual metaphors mentioned so far represent the category of ontological metaphors, which are based on the speakers' experience of physical objects and which are associated with viewing events, ideas and activities as ENTITIES, SUBSTANCES or CONTAINERS. The most obvious examples of ontological metaphors are personifications, which attribute human (by extension, humanoid) nature to inanimate objects or abstract notions. Thus in English, a mechanical clock has *hands* and a *face*. Though it is not known whether the same would hold for a **tlhaq**, we do know that an **'obmaQ** has an *arm* (**DeS**, KGT, 63), and an

open *hand* (**ghlt**, *ibid.*). The flat ends of a pigment stick (**rllth naQ**) are called *fingernails* (**nItlhpaChDu'**, KGT, 80), and there is a cooking pot (**nevDagh**) which can be recognized by its *elbows* (**DeSqIvDu'**, KGT, 97). Both nouns, **nItlhpaChDu'** and **DeSqIvDu'**, have the plural suffix reserved for body parts. The existence of the slang expressions **mu'mey ghoQ** and **mu'mey Doy'** seems to indicate that, on the one hand, WORDS ARE LIVING BEINGS, which is why some of them are described as *tired*; on the other hand, WORDS ARE FOOD, hence like food they can be *fresh*. It remains to be seen whether **'up** or **raghmoH** can be used to criticize the poor quality of written or spoken discourse. Ample evidence shows that tlhIngan Hol has a conceptual metaphor BLOOD IS A LIVING BEING since it can *scream* (**'IwlIj jachjaj**, CK) and *sing* (**bomDI' 'IwwIj qaqaw**, TKW, 17), and a Klingon is well advised to listen to the *voice* of his blood (**'IwwIj ghogh yIQoy**, TKW, 31). Similarly, spirits are often talked about as if they were living beings which can be fed. What is more, the noun **qa'** takes a **-pu'** plural suffix. Incidentally, the alternative interpretation of the saying — **qa' wIje'meH maSuv** *We fight to buy the spirit* (TKW, 7) — could suggest that SPIRIT IS A COMMODITY. A Ferengi influence perhaps?

Interestingly, good music and good food can both *stab* (**DuQ bom**, KGT, 72; **DuQ Soj**, KGT, 84). These two expressions are connected with what seems to be a fundamental difference between human and Klingon physiology: the human predilection for sweetness and the Klingon penchant for pungent, or *sharp* tastes. The difference can explain why the underlying metaphor SWEET IS GOOD (evident in 'home, *sweet* home; *sweet* dreams')

is not shared by tlhIngan Hol, which tellingly, does not even have a word for 'sweet'. With respect to the concept of sharpness English seems somewhat ambivalent: the phrase *the cutting edge* carries positive meaning but the expression *cutting remarks* has negative connotations. In the warrior tongue SHARP IS GOOD, as reflected in the plethora of essentially positive metaphors connected with cutting or piercing, being pungent or biting in taste. Klingon students, eager to be enlightened, will expect their teacher to **chuH** them, i.e. *throw a spear at them* (KGT, 149). In slang, the idea of being clever is conveyed by the word **SIj**, which literally means to *slit* (KGT, 149), and which seems akin to the English expression 'have a *sharp* mind'. An expert **vutwI'** will be able to prepare food that not only *stabs* but which will provoke the comment about the *claw* being *sharp* (**jej pach**, KGT, 85). As it happens, this is one of the few animal metaphors attested so far. There must be more, waiting to be tracked down by a tenacious metaphor hunter. After all, the endnote to Act V Scene II of *Hamlet* (p. 210) informs us that "Klingons culturally pay much more attention to animals than to plants in their metaphors, sayings, and similes."

As far as container metaphors are concerned, in English a person can be *beside* himself or herself with joy, they can *fall into* depression, *get into* or *out of* trouble, they can have an idea *in* mind and they can make *empty* threats. No evidence exists for similar metaphors in Klingon, but in its slang use the word **qang** (KGT, 159) does evoke the image of a container.

Few speakers of Terran languages realize that numerous technical terms they use are in fact metaphorical in origin: it would be

pointless to look for non-figurative replacements of the italicized words in 'cash *flow*', '*balance* of trade' or '*affinity* between electric charges.' At this point our knowledge of specialized vocabularies in Klingon is limited but in the domain of linguistics we do find at least two words which are clearly metaphorical in nature: **mu'tlhej** and **lengwI'**. It would seem that in tlhIngan Hol sentences are perceived as words (?)woven into *ropes* and the warrior tongue can boast morphemes which *travel*.

Perhaps the most basic conceptual metaphors are the so-called orientational metaphors, which reflect the speakers' emotional and cultural experiences of spatial orientations. For example, English expressions such as 'business is looking *up*', 'to be in *high* spirits', 'to be at the *peak* of health' indicate that for English speakers UP IS GOOD. Conversely, DOWN IS BAD, as attested by phrases such as '*plummeting* sales', 'to be feeling *down*', 'economy's going *downhill*.' The fact that in Klingon slang, the word **chong** came to denote positive qualities, i.e. 'be good, excellent, thorough' (KGT, 148) might suggest that for Klingons, too UP IS GOOD, or at least VERTICAL IS GOOD. Since **SaS** (KGT, 163) is used in slang to express the meaning opposite to **chong**, it can be argued that for Klingons HORIZONTAL IS BAD. Why? Probably because in the Klingon mind **SaS** is associated with such negative aspects of life as fainting or being sick, two states which might result in a horizontal position. As is well known, Klingons do not faint (**vulchoHbe' tlhInganpu'**, TKW, 40), they do not get sick (**ropchoHbe' tlhInganpu'**, *ibid.*) and they do not lie in bed, either (**QongDaqDaq Qotbe' tlhInganpu'**, *ibid.*). In English, the

homophony between 'right' (opposite of 'left') and 'right' (good, honorable, true) may not be coincidental - for lots of humans 'left' is ... well ... sinister whereas RIGHT IS decidedly GOOD. The scarcity of canonical data precludes drawing far-reaching conclusions but in Klingon, where the verb **nIH** is polysemous between 'right (side)' and 'to steal', conceivably, RIGHT IS BAD.

Finally, a brief comment on colors. While it is generally known that hearing **ghobe'! SuD** provokes an outburst of laughter among Klingons, it remains a mystery why this is so. **SuD Suvwl'pu'** could also be interpreted as warriors gamble, which gives us ground to speculate that for a warrior GOING TO BATTLE IS GAMBLING. Nevertheless, there could be unknown color metaphors lurking in the joke, similar to the Federation Standard expressions 'to see *red*', 'to be *green* with envy', 'to feel *blue*.' Perhaps one day Maltz will enlighten us on this point.

There is no reason why a scholar hunting for metaphors in Klingon should limit his or her hunting ground to conventional metaphors found in the language of proverbs, rituals and everyday colloquial

exchanges. Creative metaphors in Klingon literature still await analysis and doubtless at some stage a xenophilologist will rise to the challenge and compare the conceptual universe of Shex'pir with that of the Terran translator of his work. The hunt for metaphors has barely begun.

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