

# Inside or Outside of Politics?

## *Metaphor and Paradox in Journalism*

IINA HELLSTEN & MIKA RENVALL

Journalistic texts abound in expressions like “Finland should not sell herself too cheap.” or “Viinainen’s announcement was an annoying spoke in the budgetary wheel.” On the pages of the newspapers and in the television programmes the politicians play their games, do their horsetrading and backstage wheeling and dealing. Political events are constantly covered from a conventional perspective using the parlance of the game, the theatre, or the marketplace. What these expressions have in common is that they are all metaphorical ways of covering events. This metaphorical approach is perhaps best seen in political caricatures which are used to give a condensed representation of dominant conceptions.

Single metaphorical expressions would hardly have much greater significance than the avoidance of repetition or an amusing way of expressing things. Thus it would be only a case of reporters’ creativity if a metaphor made a snappy, penetrating headline or a pithy comment on current events.

Such a metaphorical way of describing political activity is often taken for granted to the extent that it is not questioned. However, describing politics as a game, as business, or as a theatre is not without its consequences. In all these metaphors the citizen’s place is virtually imperceptibly defined as the sidelines: the lot of the passive observer rather than the active participant.

Of course metaphors do not compel anyone to accept such a lot, they only advocate it. This proposed position may be accepted or rejected, but it can also be bypassed with humour. In the fabric of journalistic texts metaphors are only one rhetorical means of cajoling readers into interpretation positions.

When metaphor advocates one kind of position and the requirements placed on “good” citizens de-

mand another sort of position, there arises a situation in which the reader is “urged” to be simultaneously passive and active. We refer to such a communication situation as a double bind. The term is taken from Gregory Bateson (1987), but we apply it in a different context.

The double bind is a paradoxical situation. The term makes it possible to describe a situation in which conflicting interpretation positions are offered. We believe that examination of such double binds could be useful in the critical study of journalism. In political journalism in particular conventional metaphors frequently constitute one side of the textually expressed double bind. The other side consists of cultural values, for example that very participative citizenship idealized in democracy.

With the help of the concept of double bind we try to describe theoretically how a conventional metaphor may function in the actual communication situation: i.e. we attempt to distance ourselves from the semantic examination of the metaphor and approach it from the pragmatic standpoint. It is further our intention to consider tentatively at least how a liberation from paradoxical communication situations might be achieved.

First we direct our attention towards conventional political metaphorization, after which we approach the paradoxicality arising in part from metaphor through the conceptual framework of Bateson.

### **Conventional Metaphors in Journalism**

It is for instance politics and economics which come in for the greatest metaphorization in journalism. Both are treated with conventional metaphorical routines, and thus concretized. But conventional metaphors also restrict the describing of the situation. They limit the perspective from which matters can be seen. While highlighting something they also hide some aspects.

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*Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,  
University of Tampere, P.O. Box 607, FIN-33101 Tampere*

According to research carried out in the USA the most frequently used metaphors about politics occurring in the news are war, game, business and drama (So 1987; Fiske 1987, 291-292; Barbe 1990; Mumby & Spitzak 1991). Comparable metaphorical descriptions of politics also recurred in the Finnish (Hellsten 1994; Mustaparta 1996) and Swedish (Jacobson 1994) debates on EU membership.

## The Game, Theatre and Business of Politics

Politics frequently appears in metaphors as the dirty game of the politicians. In Cartoon 1 Paavo Väyrynen functions as a metaphor of political culture, even if the picture could be interpreted as describing Väyrynen as a person or the Centre Party as a political party. In any case, politics is seen in the cartoon to be childish pursuit of self interest.

Describing politics metaphorically in terms of a game creates a picture of it as a competition between parties and emphasizes the differences of opinion between individuals and parties. A game, be it exemplified in competitive sport or a gamble, always embodies the concept of struggle, competition in respect of some prize. The prize in the game of politics is defined as "MY interest" (cf. Cartoon 1). Describing politics as some sort of a game puts the citizens in the position of spectators, whose task it is to follow politicking from the sidelines.

Drama embodies the conception of goings-on behind the scenes. Describing politics as a theatre also

puts the citizens in the position of external spectators whose sole task is to follow the political performance – be this farce, comedy or tragedy. According to the drama metaphor politics is rehearsed, decisions are exhibited before the people only when they are complete (cf. Edelman 1988). Politics is something remote and inaccessible: the audience are not welcome on stage during a performance.

The metaphor of business includes concepts of buying, buyers, sellers, prices and buying situations. Politics looks like dubious horsetrading. Again the role of the citizen is a minor one, the buyers and sellers are the politicians and organizations. The price of the goods, however, may be extracted from the citizen, (the inferior).

Such conventional metaphorical descriptions exclude the option to cover matters in alternative ways. They function ideologically. One aim of metaphor analysis might be considered the exposing of this ideology and making it possible to create alternative metaphors.

## Passive Citizens and Active Politicians – How is the Metaphor Read?

Metaphors have a dual role in signification; they can be used to both strengthen culturally shared concepts and to create new ways of seeing the world (cf. Chilton & Ilyin 1993). So, too, the metaphors of journalism may serve to hide or highlight. On the one hand a metaphor puts political issues into a concrete form, but it also affords only one way of contemplating events. For example, rendering concrete the complex issue of the EU through metaphors might in point of fact complicate the associated problems of communication.

The adoption of certain conventional metaphors is not necessarily either justified or criticized. Politicians and public relations officials are concerned to invent as condensed metaphors as possible to get the media hooked and use the metaphors without editing. But not all journalistic metaphors are first used by sources, others are coined by the journalists themselves. Using metaphor serves the interests of both the source and the media. The interests of the journalist are served in that the metaphor affords a pithy expression for a headline or leader, and it serves the interest of the source because the metaphorical description always presents matters in a certain context of meaning.

In the metaphors pertaining to the EU both those used by those in favour and by those against emphasized the passivity of the people. For those in favour of membership the process was a train (cf. Musta-



*The activity paradox: a political stereotype Text in the bubble: MY interest MY benefit MY goal MY... Text in the flower: EU? (Helsingin Sanomat 8 October, 1994)*

parta 1996), with all the Finns on board – under the direction of the government. For those opposed to EU membership it was a deal between, lites or a play presented to the people. In these, too, the people were put into the role of passive observers (Hellsten 1996). The metaphors used might well arouse different feelings towards the politicians negotiating EU membership, but the passivity they advocated for the people was surprisingly uniform.

There was a conflict between the conventional metaphors of the EU debate and the referendum which stressed the active role of the people: on the one hand journalism treated the EU issue as political processes are treated i.e. as a journey, a game, business and a theatre, while on the other hand the referendum required that a good citizen take part in decision-making. The metaphor of the EU would indeed seem to constitute a double bind together with ideals stressing political activity.

It would appear that people may have felt they had got into a paradoxical situation when deciding about the EU. Individuals interviewed in connection with the EU project were united in the concept of “good citizen”, according to which the decision on how to vote should be made rationally, relying on sense. The majority of citizens felt that they had not had sufficient information, notably regarding the effects of EU membership on everyday life, or then they admitted that the subject did not interest them. Despite this they all stated that they would vote (Alastalo 1995 and 1996). Respondents evaded the conflict in which on the one hand an individual was supposed to make a rational decision and on the other to vote although rational decision-making appeared an impossibility by saying that before voting on the issue (which was at present of no interest), they would inform themselves.

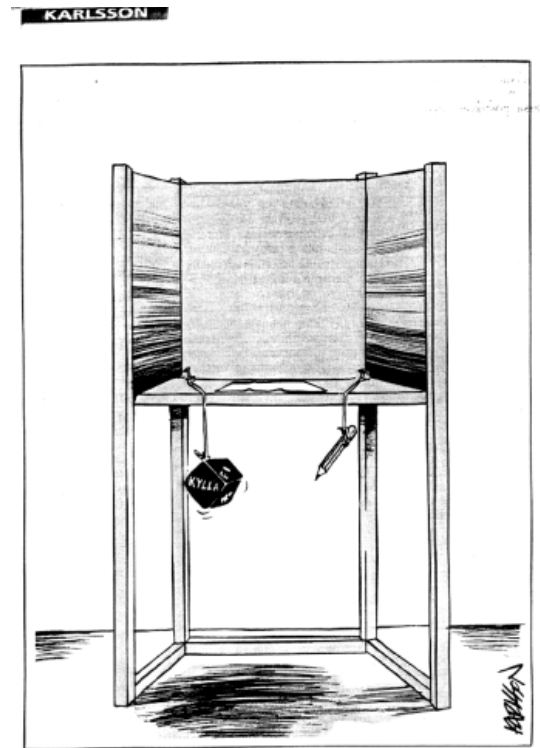
We believe that such a paradoxical situation can be condensed into a double bind:

- If you do not vote rationally, you are not a good citizen
- If you vote, you are not rational, and so not a good citizen

In order to resolve the situation a voter might either 1) claim that everything was already decided and that Finland would join the EU whichever way the referendum went or 2) seek to step above the role which journalism proposed by acquiring information independently in order to reach a decision or 3) reject the idea of rational decision-making and stress his/her own participation boldly on grounds of his/her own feelings and intuitions.

## The Paradoxes of Activity and Being Reasonable

We have presented two interrelated double binds, both of which have to do with being a “good citizen”. The first can be encapsulated into the sayings “Politics is a game, business and play-acting; if you are active in that you are not a good citizen” and “Politics, voting in elections etc. are part of democracy; unless you take an active part you are not a good citizen. The second consists of the sayings “If you do not vote, and rationally at that, you are not a good citizen” and “Decisions are made in private rooms, there is no sense in voting”. The former of these could be called the “activity” paradox (cf. Cartoon 1). The latter could be called the “rationality” paradox (cf. Cartoon 2).



*The rationality paradox: A dice, (yes or no) for the voter in the EU referendum (Helsingin Sanomat 5 October 1994)*

Of the options for action presented above the first would appear to concur with the positioning offered by the conventional metaphors: the matter has been settled in the politicians’ games, instead of active voting passivity is preferred. Thus the respondents

reject the claim of the “activity paradox” that being a good citizen presupposes being active. In the second and third alternatives citizens opt for the saying requiring activity and now appear to be taking a stand as regards the “rationality paradox”. They either refuse to accept that rational decision-making is impossible (the second alternative) or they take the view that being a good citizen does not require rationality in politics (third alternative cf. Cartoon 2).

It is uncertain whether the respondents interviewed by Alastalo (1995) really made choices or whether they only proposed those solution models which came to mind in order to see how the interviewer reacted. In Bateson’s parlance they would then have been attempting metacommunication with the interviewer. It is by communication on communication that the double bind can be escaped. The interviewees may have been attempting metacommunication with the interviewer about their double bind rather than to communicate about the choices really made.

In both the activity paradox and the rationality paradox the second of the commands is presented according to conventional metaphors. In the activity paradox the metaphorizations of politics propose passivity, cultural values and ideals propose activity. In the rationality paradox the same phenomenon recurs: cultural values advocate rationality, metaphors induce the politics of the game.

The positioning proposed by metaphor is not necessarily the same as the entire interpretation position proposed by journalism. Editorials, interviews and other texts contain both abundant metaphor and ample literal expressions, and the position they propose is the opposite to that of the metaphors we presented. Citizens may actually be exhorted to vote, or concern may be expressed about passivity. Metaphors take up a paradoxical relation vis à vis other positions and make communication complex and internally conflictual. It is just this situation which we believe can be well described by the concept of double bind. In the following we attempt a rather more systematic examination of what the concept of double bind entails.

## **Pathological Communication, Paradox and Double Bind**

The idea behind pathological communication comes from the concept of double bind developed by Bateson and co-workers (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland 1956). The concept originated in psychology where attempts have been made to use it to shed light on the genesis of schizophrenia, but it has also been used to describe more widely the pathologies of social communication. We use the concept of

double bind in this broad sense, and our point of departure has been notably Wilden’s (1980, 108, 117-121; Wilden 1987) partially critical interpretation of Bateson’s view (for critique see e.g. *ibid.* 114; Wilden 1986, 285, Wilden 1987, 47-54). Double bind is a communication situation that has become paradoxical. Some double binds may be pathological.

We do not wish to claim that journalism is of itself pathological, or that following the media causes passivity. However, we do argue that certain journalistic conventions, such as the metaphorization of politics, may produce, confirm or perhaps even reveal social or cultural pathologies. Bateson calls the genesis of such pathologies schismogenesis (see Bateson 1987, 61-72).

Double binds are based on paradoxicality. Understanding the concept of double bind requires that a distinction be made between the semantic paradox and the double bind (see Wilden 1987, 12-13). In semantic paradoxes – for example in the statement “I am lying” – we have a statement which leads to a contradiction both if it is taken to be true, in which case it is false, and if it is taken to be false, in which case it is true. Such a statement is paradoxical only when examined within itself, out of context. In normal speech, for example, the statement “we are lying” is not paradoxical, if, for example we have just before it claimed that we come from Mars.

The double bind differs from the semantic paradox because in that there is the issue of actors in a certain communication situation (Wilden 1980, 103). Here there are not statements but commands. In the existential paradox – for example in the written text “do not read this sentence” – one command is expressed explicitly and the other is to be read “between the lines”. The fact that the text is written at all is an exhortation to read it. If one command is obeyed and the text is read, the other command is disobeyed and vice versa (Wilden 1980, 104). Double binds are sometimes very difficult to overcome, since overcoming frequently involves coming to an agreement with the party who issued the conflicting commands.

## **Pathological and Non-Pathological Double Binds**

The existence of double binds depends on the conception that all behaviour is communicative. According to this conception communication is always and everywhere, even silence is communication (Bateson 1987, 110, 119). Any communication at all is always a report on some situation, a command to respond to a message in some way and a question on a response. (Wilden 1986, 260).

Some double binds lead to a pathological situation (Bateson 1987, 206-207; also Wilden 1980, 120). We paraphrase Bateson's definition of a pathological double bind as follows:

- 1) Two or more persons are connected with the bind, one of these is shown to be the 'victim'. Thus this is an unequal relationship.
- 2) The victim feels that s/he is *constantly* in the double bind situation. This is no traumatic experience but a way of relating to a situation learned by repetition.
- 3) There are two *conflicting negative* commands in the situation and the *threat of punishment*. These commands may be presented in the following forms:
  - a) "don't do this, or you will be punished"
  - b) "if you do not do this, you will be punished".
- 4) One of the commands is presented *vis à vis* the other at a metalevel. This requirement is usually communicated non-verbally.
- 5) There is still one negative command connected to the situation, and it prevents the victim from escaping from the double bind. Wilden (1980, 120) considers this sociologically one of the main elements of the pathological double bind.

Not all these elements are still needed once the victim has learned to *interpret his/her world via the forms of the double bind*.

Bateson's hypothesis (ibid. 208) is that on getting into the double bind situation the individual finds it difficult to decide whether the communication should be interpreted metaphorically or literally. This further entails that the individual be in an intense relationship to others, i.e. it is important that s/he should understand correctly what manner of message this is in order to respond correctly. The situation, however, is such that if two commands are conveyed, one of these negates the other. But there is no chance to make comments on these messages in order to ascertain to which the response should be made.

Not all double binds lead to a pathological situation. The double bind situation is frequently an everyday one. Bateson (ibid. 209) presents the following example of a mixture of metaphorical and literal "One day an employee went home during office hours. A fellow employee called him at his home and said lightly "Well, how did you get there?" The employee replied "By automobile.""

The questioner is asking why his workmate is not at work, although he ought to be – but he does so in a jocular manner because he feels that it is not really

his business to ask such things. The respondent, on the other hand, responds literally to the metaphorical question because he is not entirely sure in what sense the question was asked and what use will be made of the answer.

This could be used as a starting point for an attempt to understand the reactions represented in the EU-interviews. One could assume that individuals who decided not to vote had taken literally the conception expressed in the conventional metaphors of politics as a game. Likewise, those voters who are not convinced of their chances of making the decision on how to vote on rational grounds would have taken literally the conception of voters' behaviour as expressed in Cartoon 2 – unless the respondents had responded metaphorically to the interviewer's literal questions.

## Double Binds in Journalism

Are there double binds in journalism? The activity and rationality paradoxes are examples of paradoxes connected to political journalism built on conflicting negative commands. One must further consider whether it is advisable to speak of the citizen as the "victim" of double bind, whether s/he feels s/he is perpetually in a double bind situation and whether it is advisable in journalism to speak of "threat of punishment". Perhaps the main issue is what prevents the reader from escaping from double binds.

There could be some point in using the term "fall victim to" if the double bind prevented or hampered citizens' participation in the social debate and in exerting influence, for example. This is undoubtedly so if they are uncertain as to whether politics is only a game or then the power of the people. Because the conventional metaphors recur constantly one may speak of being in a constant double bind.

The question of punishment is related to what a citizen loses if s/he declines to take up the interpretation position as offered by journalism. For example, in the double bind of the "rationality" linked with the EU referendum the voter may feel him/herself at risk of losing his conception of him/herself as a good individual who acts and thinks rationally: "If you don't vote rationally you are not a good citizen, if you vote you are not rational and so not good".

The metaphorical paradoxes of journalism can thus form a double bind which may in turn lead to a pathological situation. On the other hand the other statement of the paradox is composed of metaphors whose absolute positioning citizens may reject or brush aside with a laugh at metaphorization in general. Conventional metaphors may also cause the citizens' conception of politics not only to be forever

fixed as a game, but also to offer grounds for ingenious interpretation of the somewhat gamelike nature of politics in general. The realization that the game-like nature of politics is metaphorization opens the gates to creative victory over the double bind: it is a game, but not only a game.

## Out of the Double Bind?

Double binds can be overcome by metacommunication. In a pathological situation overcoming has been made difficult as here the context is restricted in a way which often renders metacommunication impossible (Wilden 1980, 123). In a way a pathological context infiltrates attempts at metacommunication and renders them void.

In the paradox of activity only the feeling of the individual that the decision has already been made behind the scenes would indicate some kind of pathological quality. This is a matter of alienation in which the individual accepts his/her own powerlessness to exert any influence. S/he may have taken literally the metaphorical talk of politics as a game, a theatre or business although at the same time s/he feels that this should not be so, thereby acquiescing to the role of "victim" in the double bind of "activity".

Brushing away the rationality of decision-making may be seen as acquiescence to the double bind of "rationality". On the other hand gathering one's own information does not stop either of these double binds but goes "outside". Escaping from double binds is indeed constant progress "upwards", from the double bind to metacommunication.

Journalists also have the power to affect the double bind into which they entice their audiences. One way of breaking free of double binds could be to change the conventional metaphors. The metaphorical discussion on politics as a game, a theatre and as business needs alongside it an alternative way of describing politics – possibly as cooperation between people and politicians or as interaction. Casting doubt on the conventionalized use of metaphor requires that alternatives be found.

If the "politics as a game" metaphor is taken literally, the subsequent discussion will become trapped inside the metaphor – it may, for example, become limited to arguing about the different meanings of the game. Changes in the meaning of metaphors within one metaphorical system does nothing to cast doubt on the metaphor itself – for example, on the idea that politics is a game (Hellsten 1996). Such fruitless development of metaphors does nothing to advance the discussion as it operates within the context of double bind.

Another way to overcome double bind situations would be by improving the channels and opportuni-

ties for metacommunication. However, the characteristic features of journalistic communication bring something of their own to this investigation. Journalism is a one-way activity in the sense that journalists communicate directly with their readers, while the chances of the readers to respond are not the same. A reader may opt not to read an article, s/he may write a letter to the editor, telephone the journalist or stop subscribing to the paper.

Metacommunication could be achieved, for instance, through critical research on the media and through self-critique by journalists. In such a case the ideal media critique would be indirect metacommunication between readership and publication. However, journalists easily feel that critique is an attack. In the light of the outline presented, this can be understood in at least two ways. Either journalists feel that the critique is coming from somewhere "outside" the relationship between the media and the readers, or then for one reason or another they do not wish to communicate with their readers.

According to Brox (1996, 308) one effective remedy to open up schismogenetic relationships is cooperation between those who create the relationship and those who research it. It is possible to try to loosen the double binds of journalism through cooperation between journalism and researchers of journalism. This, however, presupposes that the nature of the existing paradoxical situations is known.

The paradoxical nature of political journalism could perhaps be understood against the background of the changes which have occurred in the position of journalism. Hallin (quoted in Rosen 1991, 270) states that formerly politically aligned journalism has been replaced by a journalism which has assumed a professional stance of "detached realism", claiming to be above politics. Metaphorizing politics as a game, as business or as a theatre could thus perhaps be considered as keeping a distance from politics.

The notion of journalism parting company with politics seems paradoxical, however, in the light of the great weight of politics within journalism. Rosen (ibid. 272; cf. Kunelius & Heikkilä 1996, 5-10) points out that the media can continue to operate only as long as there is political discussion and there are plenty of letters to the editor. One may well wonder what the "distance" is which journalists have put between themselves and politics and what ends it serves.

It would be tempting to think that the journalists are seeking to take critical distance from politics. However, critical examination requires that some preferable alternative or ideal be brought forward while the criticism is being made. Malmberg (1984, 10-11) calls this demand the "axiological question" of critical argumentation. Similarly, critical exami-

nation would take journalism inside politics, not outside it. In this sense the way of seeing politics through the conventional metaphor of the game would rather seem to be a parody, a jibe at politics.

According to Bakhtin (1984, 127) parodying is creating “a decrowning double” (cf. Cartoon 1) and “the world turned inside out”. There is a parodic “laughing aspect” to everything. From this standpoint the paradoxes of journalism might promote the realization of politics as simultaneously serious and “laughing”, but also the passivation of people (cf. Glasser & Ettema 1993).

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