

Figures of Speech: Boosting Tacit Knowledge Externalization in Projects

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Abstract: “Using the process of Externalization, subjective tacit knowledge based on experience is converted into objective explicit knowledge” (Tiwana, 2002). Externalization is the most difficult process to put into practice. “It is a quintessential knowledge-creation process in that tacit knowledge becomes explicit, taking the shapes of metaphors, analogies, concepts, hypotheses or models” (Nonaka Takeuchi, 1995). “Tacit knowledge, by its nature, it’s hard to articulate through analytical methods of deduction and induction” (Villa, 2023). Literal language uses words in their most basic sense for conveying information clearly and directly. Although literal language is straightforward and factual, it nevertheless proves limited in uncovering tacit knowledge. Literal language can describe the tip of the iceberg, ignoring the iceberg. While literal language conveys the exact meaning of words, figurative language conveys a deeper more imaginative meaning. Thus, figurative language should be used for uncovering the iceberg. Figures of speech are linguistic tools used to convey meaning and enhance the impact of language by deviating from the literal interpretation of words. They add richness and depth to writing, depicting something in a non-literal way, evoking emotions, painting vivid pictures, highlighting the essence of a personal experience, conveying a concept in a tasty fragrant way, avoiding time-consuming details. An appropriate metaphor is worth much more than a thousand words! This paper is aimed at discussing in a very practical way the application of a set of figures of speech for boosting the externalization of tacit knowledge in projectized environments. First of all, each figure of speech is briefly explained in terms of meaning, purpose, and application. Then benefits deriving from figures of speech are discussed. Similarly, the obstacles to use the figures of speech in a shared and effective manner. Finally, some advices are provided to project key roles, such as project manager, subject matter experts, agile coach, in order to become more familiar with figures of speech in projects. This way, figures of speech can effectively bridge knowledge management and project management, enhancing project success and personal development.

Keywords: Tacit knowledge, Knowledge externalization, Literal language, Figurative language, Figures of speech, Learning history

1. Sketching the Scene

We can open the paper with a learning history. “Learning history is a written narrative of a company’s recent set of critical episodes” (Kleiner Roth, 1998). “A good story is often the best way to convey meaningful knowledge” (Davenport Prusak, 1998). “Successful knowledge-sharing examples are gathered and documented in the form of lessons learned and best practices and these then form the kernel of organizational stories” (Dalkir, 2011). Imagine we are in a large agile project to be executed with a fractal organization based on five distributed development teams (seven people each). We decide to manage the project using the scaled approach “SoS - Scrum of Scrums” also known as “Meta Scrum”. SoS necessarily requires to run some mandatory ceremonies including sprint retrospective. A sprint retrospective is a meeting held at the end of a sprint (aka “iteration”), typically every two weeks. “The purpose of Sprint Retrospective is to plan ways to increase quality and effectiveness. The Scrum Team inspects how the last Sprint went with regards to individuals, interactions, processes, tools, and their Definition of Done. Assumptions that led them astray are identified and their origins explored. The Scrum Team discusses what went well during the Sprint, what problems it encountered, and how those problems were (or were not) solved. The Scrum Team identifies the most helpful changes to improve its effectiveness” (Schwaber Sutherland, 2020). Sprint retrospective is based on the twelfth principle of Agile Manifesto: “At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly” (Authors of agile manifesto, 2001). Sprint retrospective can be performed physically in presence or remotely. In both cases, sprint retrospective requires a live synchronous interaction. Sprint retrospective is a powerful opportunity for sharing knowledge, according to a continuous improvement perspective. However, sprint retrospective might be unproductive with participants discussing but not going into things and simply exchanging obvious considerations. In short: “much ado about nothing!”. Scrum retrospective is focused on process and people. During this meeting, the agile team (product owner and development team members) reflects on the past sprint to identify what went well, what didn't, what can be done differently, and how processes and behaviors can be improved. The goal is to create an action plan for implementing improvements as needed. Effective sprint retrospectives require agile team members to communicate openly, provide constructive feedback, listen actively, collaborate, reflect, commit to improvement, be accountable, show empathy, maintain transparency, and keep a positive attitude. These behaviors foster a productive and supportive environment where continuous improvement can thrive. Coming back to the case history, each of

the five teams must hold its own local retrospective and then a summary retrospective must be held among the representatives of the five teams. Individuals (35 in total) have different levels of experience and mastery about the sprint retrospective ceremony, within the same team and among teams. Thus, tacit knowledge gained by each individual participating in sprint retrospectives, should be shared as much as possible in the most effective way, in order to better perform the next retrospectives. How to share my tacit knowledge distilling which way a retrospective should be experienced? A hyperbole could be the winning card. Hyperbole is a figure of speech that entails deliberate and obvious exaggeration used for emphasizing the magnitude of the topic in question. It doesn't must be taken literally but it should be used for creating a strong impression or adding dramatic effect to a key point. Speaking about projects, hyperbole should be used in the collective moments of the project life cycle during which people are called to share a common mindset and meaning of things. On the one hand, the application of hyperbole in managing projects can foster these benefits: emphasize key points, motivate and inspire the team, introduce humour, enhance clarity and impact, and encourage creativity. These benefits contribute to a more dynamic and effective project management environment. On the other hand, the application of hyperbole in managing projects might cope with some obstacles and try to limit these negative effects: misinterpretation, loss of credibility, desensitization, cultural misunderstandings, and undermining the seriousness of critical situations. For example, Misinterpretation: "We need to work 24/7 to meet this mandatory deadline!". This hyperbole might be taken as a literal requirement rather than an emphasis on urgency, creating confusion, demotivation, sense of inadequacy, fear within the project team. Coming back to the case history, this may be a powerful hyperbole for depicting the deep essence of the sprint retrospective: "Some drops of blood must flow during the sprint retrospective". It's an amplified way of emphasizing the intensity and honesty required during a sprint retrospective. This hyperbole emphasizes the need for intense, honest, and sometimes uncomfortable discussions to drive meaningful improvements. It highlights the importance of facing conflicts directly and being committed to the process of continuous improvement, even if it involves difficult conversations, moving away the comfort zone before the point of no return. In summary, "Better to shed a few drops of blood today, than to bleed ourselves dry tomorrow".

2. The Figures of Speech for the Externalization of Tacit Knowledge in Projects

There are a lot of figures of speech. It's generally accepted that there are approximately 200 to 300 distinct figures of speech. This range includes both commonly used figures and least known ones. For the purpose of this paper a set of eight figures of speech will be discussed. They are: 1) hyperbole (already described in chapter 1 of this paper), 2) metaphor, 3) simile, 4) oxymoron, 5) imagery, 6) paradox, 7) personification, 8) euphemism. These figures are relevant to projectized environments, particularly during early stages of new product development. *"New knowledge was created based on discussions in a collaborative design workshop and stories and metaphors were important mechanisms for this"* (Sakellariou Karantinou Goffin, 2017).

3. Figure of Speech n.2 – Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech that entails the comparison of two unlike things by stating that one thing is another, thereby highlighting an assonance between them, directly equating the two elements. Therefore, in a metaphor a word or phrase is applied to a subject, object or action to which it is not literally applicable. The purpose of a metaphor is to create a vivid image or to convey a concept in a more or impactful way. Speaking about projects, we can discuss this metaphor: *"Product Owner is Janus Bifrons"*. Who is Janus Bifrons? Janus Bifrons is a figure from Roman mythology. Janus is the god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and endings. He is usually depicted as having two faces, one looking to one direction (the future) and the other one to the opposite direction (the past), symbolizing his ability to see both forward and backward in time, making him a central figure in rituals and ceremonies related to beginnings and endings. Who is the Product Owner? The Product Owner in an agile environment is a crucial role responsible for maximizing the value of the product resulting from the work of the development team(s). This role represents the voice of the customer and ensures that the team(s) delivers value to the business. The Product Owner conveys the product vision and goals to the team(s) and is accountable for creating and prioritizing the product backlog. Why Product Owner is Janus Bifrons? Janus Bifrons, with his two faces looking both forward and backward, symbolizes the duality and transitions that are central to the Product Owner's responsibilities. More in depth: a) like Janus, the Product Owner looks forward to the future, defining the product vision and strategy to guide the development team. At the same time, Product Owner looks backward, considering past feedback and performance to refine and improve the product; b) Product Owner, on the one hand, must discover needs and expectations of various stakeholders, business owners first of all, on the other hand he/she must clarify requirements to development team(s) and discuss and regularly validate product increments. Similarly to how

Janus oversees transitions and dualities, Product Owner ensures that the product backlog reflects both immediate priorities and long-term goals; c) Janus is the god of transitions, and the Product Owner facilitates the transition of ideas from concept to implementation based on timeboxed iterations. The metaphor should foster the following benefits: Clarity in that it helps team members and stakeholders to understand the dual nature of the Product Owner's responsibilities; Engagement in that it depicts a vivid and memorable image that can make this role more recognized and played; Focus in that it underlines the importance of looking both forward and backward to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with the product vision. However, the metaphor might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Ignorance in that some agile team members might not be familiar with Janus Bifrons, leading to confusion; Cultural relevance in that this metaphor may not fit with all cultural contexts, potentially limiting its effectiveness if not even offend cultural values; Over-Simplification in that while this metaphor can clarify the essence of the role, it might oversimplify complex responsibilities and nuances. Summing-up, metaphors are strongly suggested in projectized situations for explaining complex concepts or roles, aligning team vision, highlighting challenges, and facilitating change management.

4. Figure of Speech n.3 – Simile

Simile is a figure of speech that compares two different things using the words "like" or "as" to highlight a similarity between them. Similes are used to make descriptions more pregnant by drawing parallels between the unfamiliar and the familiar. The purpose of a simile is to clarify a concept by underlining similarities between two different things that are very distant in reality but have a red thread that links them. *"Like a fish out of water"* (someone who is uncomfortable or out of place in a particular situation) and *"As clear as crystal"* (clarity of something, comparing it to the transparency of crystal) are common examples of similes. Speaking about projects, we can discuss this simile: *"Working in high-performing agile team it's like being in a beehive with many other hardworking bees filling the cells with honey"*. It draws a bright comparison between the collaborative and industrious nature of a high-performing agile team and the organized, efficient work of bees in a beehive. This simile points out some key peculiarities. Collaboration: just as bees work together harmoniously to fill the cells with honey, team members in an agile team collaborate closely to create product increments in timeboxed sprints (iterations). At the end of each sprint a product increment is carried out, such as some cells are filled with honey; Efficiency: Bees are known for their efficiency and productivity, mirroring how agile teams strive to deliver high-quality product increments frequently and effectively; Role Specialization: in a beehive, each bee has a specific role, similar to how agile teams have defined roles, responsibilities, way of working that contribute to the overall performance of the sprint; Continuous Improvement: Bees continuously work to maintain and improve the hive, just as agile teams focus on iterative development and continuous improvement. The simile should foster the following benefits: Enhanced Understanding in that simile helps team members and stakeholders to visualize the collaborative and productive nature of a high-performing agile team; Increased Engagement in that the bright imagery of a beehive can make the concept more engaging and memorable; Improved Motivation in that comparing the agile team to hardworking bees can inspire and motivate team members to work diligently and collaboratively for carrying out the precious honey. However, the simile might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Misinterpretation in that some team members might not fully understand the comparison if they are not familiar with the behavior of bees; Cultural Sensitivity in that simile often rely on culturally specific references that may not translate well across cross-culture teams. What is a common and easily understood comparison in one culture might be confusing or meaningless in another. If the audience is not familiar with the topic, the simile can fail to convey the intended meaning or create confusion. Summing-up, similes are strongly suggested in projectized situations to make people identify with a positive, rewarding, motivating, appreciated situation or to warn them of a negative, penalizing, demotivating, unseemly situation. Also, when a change of mindset is required to cope with project challenges, forcing people out their comfort zone and consolidated habits.

5. Figure of Speech n.4 – Oxymoron

Oxymoron is a figure of speech in which contradictory terms appear in conjunction. Oxymorons are used to reveal a deeper truth, to create a dramatic effect, to discuss innovative approaches. Thus, highlighting the complexity or duality of a subject. For example, *"Organized chaos"* underlines the balance between creativity and organization. Oxymorons can be effectively used in project management to convey complex ideas, and emphasize the multifaceted nature of a situation. For example, *"Agree to disagree"* can help to recognize differing viewpoints while promoting conflicts resolution in a project team; *"Calculated risk"* can inspire project team to take bold yet thoughtful actions. Speaking about projects, we assume to be in a large project crowded

by a very large number of stakeholders different from each other in terms of specialization, organizations to which they belong, physical location, interests at stake. Indeed, stakeholders are a relevant factor of complexity. A junior project manager asks a senior project manager for advice on how to manage communications with stakeholders. The senior project manager suggests to classify the stakeholders using the Interest/Power Matrix and to pay a great attention to stakeholders with High Interest and Low Power. The senior project manager emphatically declaims this oxymoron: *"Deafening silence"*. It highlights the significant interest that these stakeholders have in the project, despite their limited influence. It underlines the importance of listening to their ideas/concerns and ensuring their voices are heard, even if they do not hold substantial power, fostering a more inclusive and attentive project environment. In summary *"no news, bad news"*. Oxymorons should foster the following benefits: Enhanced Communication in that it can briefly convey complex ideas and making communication more effective; Humor and Engagement in that it can add a touch of humor, making discussions more engaging and less tense; Creative Thinking in that it asks people to embrace the duality to cope with. However, oxymorons might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Overuse in that excessive use of oxymorons can make communication less serious or professional; Ambiguity in that oxymorons can create ambiguity, making it difficult for team members to understand the exact message; Dilution of Seriousness in that in critical situations, the use of oxymorons might undermine the seriousness of the message, leading to a lack of urgency or importance.

6. Figure of Speech n.5 – Imagery

Imagery is a figure of speech that involves the use of bright mental images for the listener. It helps to paint a picture in mind, visualize scenes, and make the experience more immersive and engaging. Imagery enhances the experience by appealing to the senses and creating vivid mental pictures. There are different types of images depending on the sense you want to activate. These are some types of imagery: Visual Imagery highlights what we see, such as colors, shapes, and appearances: *"The fog was falling thickly over the project requirements"*; Tactile Imagery involves the sense of touch, describing textures and sensations: *"The rough bark of the project sponsor scraped against the skin of project manager"*; Olfactory Imagery relates to smells, evoking the sense of scent: *"The heavy atmosphere that can be felt in project status meetings"*. Speaking about projects, *"Beyond the Pillars of Hercules"* is an imagery that can be used effectively for representing risk identification in complex projects. This phrase historically refers to the limits of the known world, symbolized by the Strait of Gibraltar, beyond which lay uncharted territories. In project management, using such imagery can help the project team to uncover risks that may not be immediately visible but could significantly influence project performance and results. It encourages a comprehensive and imaginative approach, helping the project team to explore a broader spectrum of potential risks. This way, the project team may ignore what Hercules wrote on the pillars: *"Nec plus ultra"* (a Latin phrase that translates to "nothing more beyond"). Imagery should be used in project situations such as: risk identification for exploring hidden risks; stakeholder engagement for describing project benefits in appealing terms to gain stakeholder buy-in; team motivation using powerful images to inspire the project team; communication of vision painting a clear picture of the project's end goal to align team efforts. Imagery should foster the following benefits: Enhanced Understanding in that it helps stakeholders and team members visualize complex concepts; Increased Engagement in that it makes communication more engaging and memorable; Improved Creativity in that it stimulates creative thinking and innovative solutions. However, imagery might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Ambiguity in that vague or unclear imagery can lead to confusion and misalignment; Distraction: in that overly elaborated imagery can distract from the main message; Resistance in that some stakeholders may prefer straightforward, data-driven communication over imaginative descriptions.

7. Figure of Speech n.6 – Paradox

Paradox is a figure of speech based on a statement or concept that contradicts itself or clashes intuition and common sense, but it may still hold a fundamental truth. It often challenges our understanding and forces us to think more deeply about the underlying principles. A paradox seems to be self-contradictory statement but, upon closer examination, reveals an underlying truth. Paradoxes can be used to illustrate complex ideas and provoke critical thinking. These are some typical projectized situations where paradoxes should be applied: Matrix Organization inside which the functional dimension provides stability and vertical expertise, while the project dimension drives innovation and change. Recognizing the paradoxical need for both can enhance organizational performance; Leadership Styles when the combination of commanding and participative leadership styles best responds to different project needs and team dynamics. Speaking about projects, a senior project manager wishes to share the tacit knowledge he/she gained managing risks in large, complex, innovative

projects. The paradox that sums up his/her undeniable and precious experience is *"The more risks, the better!"* This paradox can indeed hold valuable insights. At first glance, the paradox seems counterintuitive because risks are generally perceived as threats to project success. However, it suggests that a higher number of risks today can reduce the number of unforeseen and problems tomorrow. This paradox fosters a proactive behaviour against uncertainty, which allows for the early identification of a greater number of risks that feed into the risk register and related management activities (tracking, assessing, responding, monitoring). The paradox should foster the following benefits: Enhanced Critical Thinking in that it encourages team members to think deeply and consider multiple perspectives; Improved Problem-Solving in that it helps in identifying innovative solutions by challenging conventional wisdom; Balanced Decision-Making in that it promotes a holistic view that integrates seemingly opposing strategies for better outcomes. However, the paradox might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Confusion in that paradoxes can be difficult to grasp, leading to confusion among team members; Resistance to Change in that some team members may resist paradoxical thinking, preferring clear-cut solutions; Implementation Challenges in that balancing paradoxical strategies can be complex and may require significant effort and coordination.

8. Figure of Speech n.7 – Personification

Personification is a figure of speech that gives human characteristics to non-human entities, objects or abstract concepts. Personification is used to create emotional connections by making inanimate things relatable to human experiences. Personification is a powerful way to share a more engaging representation of a topic. This way, listeners can better connect to and imagine what the deep meaning of what you are communicating. *"The project never sleeps"* attributes the human quality of needing sleep to a project, which is an inanimate concept. This personification underlines that the project is continuously active and ongoing, without any breaks or downtime, much like a person who never sleeps. The implied meaning is that the project is always in motion, with constant activities, tasks, and progress being made, regardless of the time of day. Speaking about projects, two subject matter experts are sharing their experiences about project estimates and agree that *"The estimates speak to you, listen to them!"* is an excellent personification to reveal their secret in project estimates. This personification underlines the importance of paying close attention to project estimates as they provide critical insights for successful project management. The implied meaning is that numbers are just numbers if we do not document the underlying rationales. Estimates, like cold numbers, can only be bargained while rationales can be negotiated as needed. These are some typical projectized situations where personification should be applied: Stakeholder Communication in that the use of personification in presentations or reports makes complex data more engaging; Team Motivation in that describing project goals or challenges in human terms inspires and motivates team members; Risk Management in that personifying risks makes them more tangible and easier to understand for the team; Change Management in that humanizing abstract concepts like organizational change can help recipients to move from as-is toward to-be. Personification should foster the following benefits: Enhanced Engagement in that it makes communication more engaging and memorable; Emotional Connection in that it helps to create an emotional bond with the audience, making the message more impactful; Simplified Understanding in that it simplifies complex concepts by relating them to human experiences. However, personification might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Over-Simplification in that it may oversimplify complex issues, leading to a lack of depth in understanding; Inappropriate Use in that it may be seen as unprofessional or confusing, particularly around technical topics.

9. Figure of Speech n.8 – Euphemism

Euphemism is a figure of speech where a mild or indirect word or expression is used in place of one that is considered rude or unpleasant. Euphemisms soften the impact of the message and make it more agreeable. They avoid direct reference to sensitive subjects, helping to maintain politeness and social acceptance in a specific organizational and cultural environment. These are some typical projectized situations where euphemism should be applied: Performance Reviews to provide constructive feedback without reducing team members' morale: *"We need to work on some areas of improvement and not your weaknesses"*; Conflict Resolution addressing conflicts or issues in a way that minimizes tension among a contract negotiation with a supplier: *"It is clear that we have different opinions rather than irreconcilable positions"*. Speaking about projects, we are in a very complex project from a relational, diplomatic and political point of view, due to the large number of institutional stakeholders representing different organizations and countries. The interests at stake are significant and mostly undeclared. The project manager needs to raise the awareness of the team about how to move with caution in such a slippery context, bringing his/her own experience gained over the years on similar projects. One euphemism that project manager suggests is *"Open point and not problem"*.

"Open point" is a softer, less negative term compared to "problem". It suggests an issue that needs attention and resolution without the negative connotations associated with "problem". "Open point" frames the issue in a more positive light, suggesting it is something to be addressed rather than a fault or failure. Moreover, it promotes a collaborative approach for finding solutions rather than assigning blame. Euphemism should foster the following benefits: Preserves Relationships in that it helps in maintaining positive relationships throughout the life of the project; Enhances Diplomacy in that it facilitates more diplomatic and tactful communication, particularly in projects where political and cultural awareness is vital; Maintains Team Motivation in that it helps to address harsh situations respecting people. However, euphemisms might cope with these potential obstacles and negative effects: Unresolved Problems in that it skirts around the issue, doesn't address it directly and doesn't get to the point; Lack of Clarity in that it can lead to a lack of transparency and create ambiguity and confusion about the topic under discussion; Misinterpretation in that the message you want to convey could be underestimated, taken lightly or even manipulated.

10. Figures of Speech in Action

Too often project roles are not so familiar with figurative language, particularly those with a technical background. Figures of speech are used occasionally without a common and intentional purpose. They are left to discretion and personal attitude of individuals instead of being a team communication pattern. They are *"The cherries on the cake, but not the cake"*. They are not a relevant subset of project management language. This situation occurs regardless of the project management approach adopted (predictive, incremental, iterative, adaptive) and limits the sharing of tacit knowledge in projects. Therefore, the systematic use of figures of speech should be an important area of improvement to invest in. How? These are practical actions to improve awareness and mastery in figurative language: Simplify the concept selecting a set of figures of speech and preparing a glossary with a brief profile for each of them; Use meaningful examples providing examples of typical projectized situations; Show benefits highlighting how figures of speech can explicit tacit knowledge, share experiences, improve creativity and engagement. For example, analogies can clarify technical details to non-technical stakeholders; Success and failure stories sharing case histories where the good or bad use of figurative language led to successful or unsuccessful project results; Workshops running meetings where team members can practice figures of speech in specific projectized situations; Practical application creating opportunities for team members to apply figures of speech in project meetings, presentations, communications with stakeholders and other key steps of the project.

11. Conclusion

Speaking about tacit knowledge in projects, there is a significant gap. On the one hand, investing in figures of speech is worthwhile. Because figurative language is more effective than literal language to externalize the verbalizable part of tacit knowledge. On the other hand, figures of speech are poorly and badly used, due to the limited awareness and mastery owned by project roles. This way, tacit knowledge remains a private property of individuals and not a shared asset of teams and organizations. This gap may be filled through a widespread and systematic use of figurative language, as a distinctive skill of project key roles. It requires to define, agree and implement an improvement plan that includes a glossary of a set of figures of speech, meaningful examples, list of expected benefits, case histories, facilitated workshops, practical applications in real projects. This challenge assumes a strong commitment by top management and openness and willingness of the project key roles to experiment and adopt figurative language. Otherwise, figures of speech remain a "dead letter" and tacit knowledge a hidden treasure.

Ethics and AI Declarations: For this paper, an ethics declaration is not required, AI Infinity chatbot by PMI® was used for finding definitions and adapting them within the text of paper.

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