



GENDER-RELATED INTERPRETATIONS OF METAPHORS IN CONSTRUCTION DISCOURSE: ONE CONCEPT, TWO STYLES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how metaphors in construction discourse acquire gender-related stylistic interpretations when the same conceptual frame is expressed through different communicative preferences. Focusing on the widespread metaphor building as a living organism, the study treats metaphor not only as a cognitive model for understanding structures, but also as a pragmatic resource used to manage collaboration, justify decisions, and negotiate responsibility. Using a small corpus of professional interactions (design reviews, site meetings, and written comments on project documentation), metaphorical expressions were identified and interpreted through a combined cognitive–discourse approach. The results show that the organism metaphor is shared across speakers, yet it tends to be framed in two recurring styles: a more diagnostic–technical style and a more care–comfort style. The article argues that these styles are better explained by role, interactional goals, and genre constraints than by biological sex alone, although gendered socialization can shape preferred rhetorical choices.

KEYWORDS: Construction discourse, conceptual metaphor, building as organism, gendered style, professional communication, cognitive linguistics, metaphor identification, pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

Construction communication is often described as technical and standardized, yet real professional discourse includes evaluation, persuasion, and interpersonal alignment. In such contexts, metaphors help engineers, architects, and managers translate abstract design concerns into actionable meanings. The metaphor “a building is a living organism” appears when professionals speak about “breathing” facades, “healthy” microclimates, “aging” materials, or “healing” defects. These expressions compress complex causal chains into memorable images that guide decisions under time pressure. At the same time, metaphors are socially situated. The same metaphor can sound directive and problem-focused in one interaction, and protective or human-centered in another. This difference is especially visible when participants frame the project either as an object to be fixed or as an environment to be cared for. The central problem addressed here is not whether men and women use different metaphors, but how gender-related interpretive patterns emerge as “one concept—two styles” in professional talk. Treating gender as a social variable that interacts with role, status, and genre, the article explores how the organism metaphor is used to motivate independent initiative, coordinate teamwork, and justify choices in construction settings.

The study relied on a qualitative-dominant mixed procedure. A small corpus was compiled from three sources: transcripts of design-review discussions, transcripts of site coordination meetings, and written feedback fragments from project documentation. The dataset was

anonymized and segmented into speaking turns and comment units. Metaphorical expressions were identified using an adaptation of the MIPVU logic, emphasizing contextual meaning, basic meaning, and the presence of cross-domain mapping. After identification, each metaphorical unit was coded for its local function in discourse, including diagnosis, instruction, risk framing, value judgment, and responsibility assignment.

To explore gender-related styles, the analysis compared how speakers framed the same organism-based meanings in terms of lexical choice, modality, mitigation, evaluation, and interpersonal orientation. The aim was not to attribute metaphors to a gender category mechanically, but to detect recurring stylistic configurations that can become gender-indexed in professional communities.

The organism metaphor appeared across genres and participant roles, indicating that it is part of a shared conceptual toolkit in construction communication. In design reviews, it commonly served diagnostic purposes, for example when a facade was described as “breathing poorly” or a building as “overheating,” which motivated changes in ventilation, insulation, or shading. In site meetings, it often supported urgent coordination by framing defects as symptoms that must be treated quickly, encouraging immediate action and clear responsibility.

Two dominant stylistic realizations emerged. In a diagnostic-technical style, organism metaphors clustered with verbs of repair and control and with categorical modality, producing utterances that positioned the speaker as an evaluator and the building as a system requiring intervention. In a care-comfort style, the same metaphorical base co-occurred more often with language of user experience and long-term wellbeing, emphasizing how the building “feels,” how it “adapts,” and how it should “stay comfortable.” Importantly, both styles were found among speakers of different genders, but they tended to align with role distributions and communicative goals. When speakers held responsibility for compliance, safety, or deadlines, the diagnostic-technical framing became more frequent; when speakers discussed usability, spatial quality, or occupant satisfaction, the care-comfort framing increased.

The findings support a mechanism view in which metaphor is both cognitive and interactional. The organism metaphor provides a stable conceptual model, while stylistic realization adapts it to the immediate pragmatic task. This helps explain why “one concept” does not produce one uniform language pattern. In professional settings, metaphor choice is constrained by genre, institutional power, and accountability. A site supervisor may prefer more directive framing because the interaction requires rapid coordination and risk reduction, whereas an architect presenting design intent may prefer a framing that invites discussion and aligns stakeholders around shared values. Gender-related interpretation becomes visible when communities associate particular rhetorical choices with social expectations. A diagnostic-technical style can be heard as authoritative and “tough,” while a care-comfort style can be heard as relational and “supportive.” These associations may become gender-indexed, especially in traditionally male-dominated sectors where norms of directness are treated as default professionalism. However, the data suggest that the strongest predictor of style is role and interactional purpose, with gender acting as a secondary influence through socialization and perceived legitimacy.

This interpretation has practical consequences. If one style is treated as more “professional,” valuable contributions framed through the other style can be underestimated, even when they address critical outcomes such as comfort, sustainability, and user-centered safety. Training in construction communication should therefore include explicit reflection on metaphor as a

professional resource and on how stylistic diversity can improve decision quality rather than threaten efficiency.

The metaphor building as a living organism is a shared conceptual resource in construction discourse, but it is realized through at least two recurring styles that can acquire gender-related interpretations: a diagnostic-technical style and a care-comfort style. These styles are not fixed to biological sex; they emerge from role responsibilities, genre constraints, and interactional goals, while gendered expectations can amplify how they are perceived. Recognizing “one concept—two styles” helps educators and practitioners reduce bias in evaluation, improve collaboration, and develop more inclusive professional communication norms.

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