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# Snails ahead! Metaphors of change and distributed prefiguration in the degrowth movement

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## ABSTRACT

What can just and sustainable futures *look* like? How can transformative processes be *navigated* to *embody* these futures? Are these represented by a *snail going ahead slowly*, a *snake shedding skin*, or an *old oak tree harbouring great diversity*? In this research, we focus on the metaphors used by pluriversal alternatives to explore and enact desirable futures through distributed prefiguration, which manifest across various currents of the degrowth movement. We analyse the resulting imaginaries and transformative strategies through their metaphors of change, since several heuristics and models for change highlight the role of metaphors for deep transformations. Metaphors underpin worldviews and mental models, and are fundamental to interpreting the world, organising cognitive landscapes, and structuring societal systems. Building on transformation studies and cognitive metaphor theory, we use the discourse dynamics framework to surface and interpret metaphors of change used by activists and researchers in the degrowth movement. From the analysis of an international survey, a participatory activity, and interviews, it emerges that the imaginaries and strategies among degrowth proponents draw mostly on relational root metaphors and ecological or societal domains. The imaginaries suggest that degrowth can inspire deep transformations on the interrelated planes of material transactions, human and more-than-human interactions, social structures, and inner being. The transformative strategies are classified as symbiotic, ruptural, interstitial, intermingling, and enabling. Considering the means-ends coherence, the balance between unity in directionality and openness to plurality is discussed in relation to hegemony-transcending transformations, to inspire new ways of thinking, acting, and relating in prefigurative efforts.

## 1. Introduction

When imagining futures in a context of polycrisis (Morin et al., 1999; Swilling, 2020), it is common to portray a mono-futuristic continuation of the present, or to fall in a dilemma of apparently binary choices between undesired dystopias and unattainable utopias (cf. Candy, 2010). In addition to (im-)possible, (im-)plausible, or (im-)probable futures, there is increasing attention to desirable or preferable futures that can set new directions and help navigate persistent sustainability challenges (Altstaedt, 2024; Amara, 1974; Bai et al., 2016; Cork et al., 2023; Juri et al., 2025; Oomen et al., 2022). Futures hold a central role in sustainability transitions and transformations and there are increasing calls to decolonise and diversify the ways in which transformative processes are imagined and

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enacted (Arora & Stirling, 2023; Feola et al., 2020; Friedrich & Hendriks, 2024; Köhler et al., 2019). Acknowledging that this requires problematising the past, the distribution of present possibilities, and the unknown and open-ended nature of futures (Horst & Gladwin, 2024; Ketonen-Oksi & Vigren, 2024), in this paper we adopt an experimental approach to futures based on prefiguration (Mangnus et al., 2021; Monticelli & Escobar, 2024; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020).

We explore how alternatives aiming for just sustainability transformations can contribute to enacting and embodying desirable futures in the here and now. Due to our positionality as engaged researchers based in the Minority World (Alam, 2008), we work with degrowth as pluriversal alternative to better connect and work with in our geographical and historical context. As diversity and contextual specificity among or within alternative movements can lead to fragmentation, lack of collective agency and response-ability to transcend hegemonic structures (Gills & Hosseini, 2022; Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023; Velotti et al., 2024), we build on distributed forms of prefiguration across different contexts that might share common goals and means to achieve such ends (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024). With a focus on deep transformations that have potential to address more fundamental causes of unsustainability, we work at the level of worldviews, paradigms, mental models, and values (Davelaar, 2021; Inayatullah et al., 2016; Meadows, 2009). Since the conceptual systems underpinning how we see the world, think, and act in it can be understood as fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Sokolova, 2023), we identify and analyse the shared metaphors that characterise various degrowth discourses and practices.

Specifically, this study aims to understand and unpack how metaphors of change are currently used in the degrowth movement with respect to distributed prefiguration.

We ask the following research questions:

1. *What shared imaginaries of desirable futures are explored through metaphors of change?*
2. *What transformative strategies are suggested by the metaphors of change used?*

Through an interdisciplinary approach, we use conceptual metaphor theory and the discourse dynamics framework to analyse imaginaries and strategies suggested by the degrowth movement to enact desirable futures. Advancing the work on metaphors in futures research (Inayatullah et al., 2016; Judge, 2016), this study contributes to the field by exploring how metaphors of change open up and prefigure multiple or shared pathways for transformations.

The paper is structured as follows. In the background section, we introduce key ideas from transformations and futures studies, pluriversal and prefigurative politics, and metaphor theories. In the methodology, we present our experimental research design. In the results section, we analyse the metaphors of change used in different imaginaries and strategies. In the discussion, we explore findings in relation to distributed prefiguration and hegemony-transcending transformations, before concluding with some key insights.

## 2. Background

There is increasing recognition of the need for deep socio-ecological transformations to address complex and persistent sustainability challenges emerging from intersecting processes of modernism, imperialism, and capitalism (Davelaar, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2023; Scoones et al., 2020; West et al., 2024). Sustainability transformations entail “*fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational and cognitive aspects of socio-technical-ecological systems that lead to new patterns of interactions and outcomes*” (Patterson et al., 2017, p.2). Transforming towards just and sustainable futures calls for alternatives to hegemonic paradigms, practices, and policies, which can promote human and more-than-human wellbeing within earth’s carrying capacity (Feola et al., 2020; Juri et al., 2025; Kaljonen et al., 2021; Swilling, 2020).

Hegemony is here understood as the domination of a set of discursive logics within a social sphere, which create consent and rational persuasion through ideological or cultural means rather than force (Butler et al., 2000; D’Alisa & Kallis, 2016). This form of cultural hegemony is based on the emergence, sedimentation and re-articulation of common senses, “*uncritical and largely unconscious way(s) of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch*” (Gramsci, 1971, p.322). Common senses are reproduced or rearticulated through the performativity of everyday practices and discourses (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Butler et al., 2000; García López et al., 2017). Transformations can therefore be classified as hegemony-reinforcing, hegemony-replacing, or hegemony-transcending depending on the logics they adopt in their approaches to change (Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023). Key examples of hegemony-transcending transformations are given by pluriversal politics, the degrowth movement, and prefigurative politics, introduced below.

The pluriverse has been described by Kothari et al. (2019) as “*a broad transcultural compilation of concrete concepts, worldviews, and practices from around the world, challenging the modernist ontology of universalism in favour of a multiplicity of possible worlds*” (p. xvii). Pluriversal politics proposes paths for transformative world-making focused on recognizing, exploring, and making viable alternatives that nurture and enable more just and sustainable ways of being, doing, and relating (Dunlap & Tornel, 2024; Escobar, 2011, 2019, 2020; Leitão et al., 2023). Among the liveliest forms of pluriversal experimentation in the Minority World (Alam, 2008), the degrowth movement proposes counterhegemonic ways to organise affluent societies in alternative to the mainstream paradigm of infinite economic growth (Kothari et al., 2019). Degrowth encompasses an assemblage of diverse ideas and movements but can be broadly understood as a democratic and equitable downscaling of production and consumption in rich countries to lower pressures on socio-ecological systems while improving wellbeing and enhancing ecological conditions (Jackson et al., 2024; Kallis, et al., 2018; Parrique, 2023; Schneider et al., 2010). Questioning the centrality of economism, it attempts at driving radical socioecological transformations that strengthen planetary and social justice by decolonising the social imaginary, collectively exploring directions for alternative futures, and redesigning structures (Parrique, 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Developing both in theory and in practice, degrowth

embodies a critical environmental political project (Hurtado Hurtado & Hämäläinen, Ruuska, et al., 2025; Hurtado Hurtado & Glynos, 2025) that evolves with various social movements, eco-communities, and experiments of ‘real-existing degrowth’ (Kallis et al., 2022) or ‘living degrowth’ (Brossmann & Islar, 2020).

Another hegemony-transcending approach to social change focused on the embodiment of alternatives is given by prefiguration (Boggs, 1977; Monticelli, 2021; Monticelli & Escobar, 2024). Prefigurative politics aims to open affirmative pathways and to bring about change with means consistent with ends by deliberately experimenting in the present with desired future visions (Avelino et al., 2024; Ketonen-Oksi & Vignren, 2024; Leach, 2013). The alignment of means and ends is guided by shared normative values to co-create new societal structures within the old ones (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020). Examples include the alter-globalisation movement, different forms of direct action, alternative modes of consumption or provisioning like permaculture community gardens, cooperatives, and bike-repair cafes, which often intersect with degrowth practices (Maeckelbergh, 2016; Monticelli & Escobar, 2024; Wilson, 2024). Through these experiments, “the world is reimagined and remade in ideational and material ways to make systems and communities more just and more sustainable” (Avelino et al., 2024, p. 521). Prefiguration can be situated when it experiments with different relationships and practices in clearly bounded spaces, or distributed when it manifests in wider socio-spatial formations sharing goals and/or practices (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024). The two types of prefiguration do not constitute a dichotomy but a spectrum along which interrelated processes can take place from experimentation with new organisational ideas and collective codes of conduct, to diffusion of prefigurative practices for broader change (Chertkovskaya et al., 2024).

To support the prefiguration of alternatives and rearticulate common senses, different heuristics and models for systemic transformation place emphasis on mental models, myths, and metaphors (Davelaar, 2021; Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah et al., 2016; Meadows, 2009). Metaphors underpin all language, and there is broad consensus on their power to influence thought and action, as they are not simple linguistic devices but building blocks for thinking and sense-making (Gibbs, 1994; Kövecses, 2020; Lakoff & Turner, 2009; Thibodeau et al., 2019). Metaphors can structure imaginaries, worldviews, and discourses that help navigate cognitive and societal landscapes, as well as informing, supporting, and legitimising broader systemic structures (Inayatullah et al., 2016; Macgill, 2015). Imaginaries are defined differently in various disciplines from sociology, psychology, and philosophy, to decolonial theory, science and technology studies, and sustainability science and the term is often used interchangeably with ‘imagination’ (see Altstaedt, 2024; Facer & Potts, 2025; Galafassi, 2018). This gives origin to a variety of conceptualisations (e.g., social imaginaries as shared ideas and largely unstructured understandings of reality that can (re)create institutions, norms and social relations (Castoriadis et al., 2005; Taylor, 2004), or socio-climatic imaginaries as collective visions of the future that include the natural environment with attention to the complex interactions between natural and social systems over time (Milkoreit, 2017). Building on an understanding of imagination as transformative capacity that helps generate both interpretations of the present and future visions (Galafassi, 2018; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020), we focus on the creative and future-oriented aspects of imagination to better work with prefigurative approaches that envision and anticipate hegemony-transcending futures. Thus, imaginaries are here understood as representations of possible, probable, or preferable futures that are collectively held on the basis of shared understandings, fears, and desires (cf. Fairclough, 2010; Ketonen-Oksi & Vignren, 2024; Milkoreit, 2017). Once a particular set of imaginaries and metaphors gets established, it tends to become difficult to see the world and make sense of everyday life without implicit references to those metaphors (Macgill, 2015).

According to cognitive or conceptual metaphor theory and the following developments, metaphors work through “cognitive projections between domains, which are the results of our interactions in the world, through experiences, expectations, and human biology itself” (Gamonal, 2022, p.1). Such projections allow explaining an abstract or unstructured target domain, with a source domain that is more concrete and can structure the perception and understanding of the former (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For instance, the metaphor *a degrowth society will shift from the elephant to the snail* uses a biological source domain with animals characterised by different sizes and qualities to explain a target domain of human societies and economies. Mapping across domains is grounded in experiences or in historic events, and it is partial as it simultaneously emphasises and hides certain aspects of the target domain (Fischer & Marquardt, 2022; Inayatullah & Milojevic, 2015; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) categorised the metaphors resulting from such mappings as conventional or new in terms of their frequency level, and as structural, orientational, or ontological depending on whether they structure concepts with other ones, use spatial orientation, or explain abstract entities through experience with physical objects. For example, a common structural metaphor would be *approaching life as a journey*, an orientational one would describe emotions related to happiness with expressions like *feeling up*, and ontological metaphors can be used to refer, identify, or quantify, e.g., *to have little time* (Yu, 2013).

Among the different types of metaphors, basic, core, or root metaphors are of particular interest to work with deep transformations. These metaphors can influence the perception and interpretation of reality by providing basic assumptions to shape a world hypothesis or by forming a comprehensive analogy to give meaning to life (Davelaar, 2021; Landau et al., 2014; Mac Cormac, 1976; Pepper, 1942). For instance, if the world is understood *as a machine*, it is common to draw on mechanistic source domains and use expressions that describe humans as *cogs in the wheel* (Morgan, 1980). Some metaphors can also open possibilities for transformation, by offering insights to restructure certain worldviews and consider various alternatives for the creation of preferable futures (Macgill, 2015). In this paper, we build on the concept of metaphors of change used mostly in organisational studies (e.g., Marshak, 1993; Morgan, 1986; Smollan, 2014) and we extend it to the field of sustainability transformations. We suggest understanding metaphors of change as projections that describe characteristics and dynamics of change, and/or propose processes that would support transformations towards just and sustainable futures. Namely, these metaphors can help better grasp and visualize how change happens or might happen ontologically, and/or how change is or might be navigated and enacted.

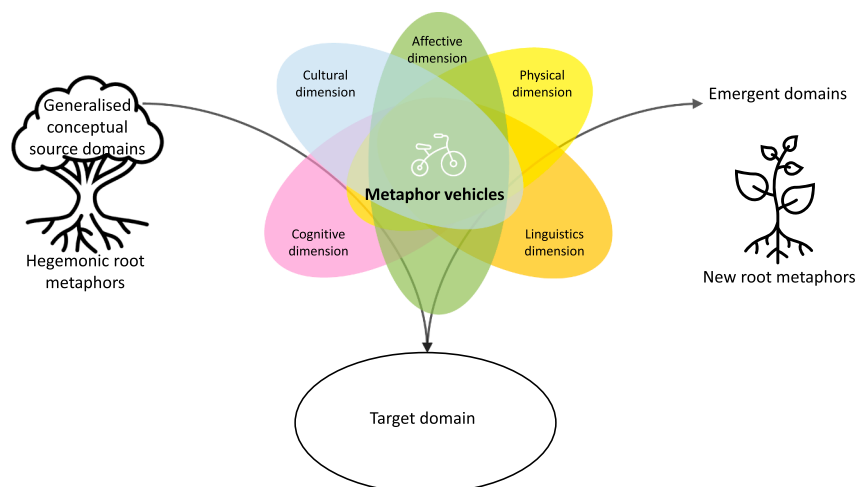
### 3. Methodology

With the aim of exploring how metaphors of change prefigure desirable futures and transformations, we conducted an exploratory study in dialogue with several members of the degrowth movement. The research was articulated in two iterative phases of data collection and data analysis, and during the process we discussed research aims, approach, and findings with the participants to advance transparency, validity, and credibility of the work, while supporting mutual learning.

We collected metaphors through an international survey with 35 participants, a participatory activity with around 50 people at the 18th Conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics and the 11th International Degrowth Conference, and 7 semi-structured in-depth interviews. The informants of the survey have been selected with a combination of stratified sampling and random sampling. For the first type of sampling, we reached out to researchers and activists from different backgrounds, who work with and/or practice degrowth in different geographical contexts. For the second type, we asked for engagement by connecting with different degrowth networks and channels. The participants in the activity at the conference were gathered spontaneously depending on personal interest to contribute to the study. The interviews have been conducted with influential researchers in the degrowth movement who could elucidate some issues or dive deeper in other aspects. Although there was broad interest in participating in the research and/or discussing the findings, we are aware that this study does not capture the totality of perspectives, and we do not intend to make any universal claims about such a diverse movement. We rather surface tendencies and interesting metaphors that can illustrate this diversity, promote reflection, and inspire new ways of thinking when imagining and approaching desirable futures and alternatives.

We engaged with the participants by first priming them with our research focus and key topics, and then combining general questions from which we elicited the spontaneous use of metaphorical language, together with specific questions that encouraged the participants to share and reflect upon the metaphors that they use or would like to use when thinking and talking about degrowth imaginaries and transformations. This process has been applied to all the three sources of data, with some adjustments to accommodate different formats, types of interaction, and forms of knowledge used or co-produced. The survey and the interviews offered information about the purpose of the study and a short introduction to metaphors and prefiguration, respectively in the survey description and in the presentation of the work at the beginning of the conversations, often going more in detail in the following questions and dialogical developments. In the participatory activity, we provided background and basic knowledge through an initial oral presentation of the ongoing research. Then, the participants interacted through a game-based learning and engagement platform to share the metaphors they usually use and generate new ones, before joining a discussion with other partakers and organisers. The more interactive nature of the activity and of the interviews allowed for in-depth reflections, mutual learning, and shared interpretations in the iterative analysis of the metaphors collected across the three activities.

To illuminate and analyse metaphors of change, we drew on the discourse dynamics framework, that is inspired by and further develops conceptual metaphor theory. The framework is based on the assumption of interconnectedness across the linguistic, cognitive, affective, physical, and cultural dimensions of metaphors, as well as between specific metaphors, discourse events and contexts (Cameron et al., 2009). Metaphors manifest through *metaphor vehicles*, namely metaphorical words or phrases produced in the flow of speech or text, which can be connected to other aspects of metaphor or discourse, and can be manifestations of conceptual

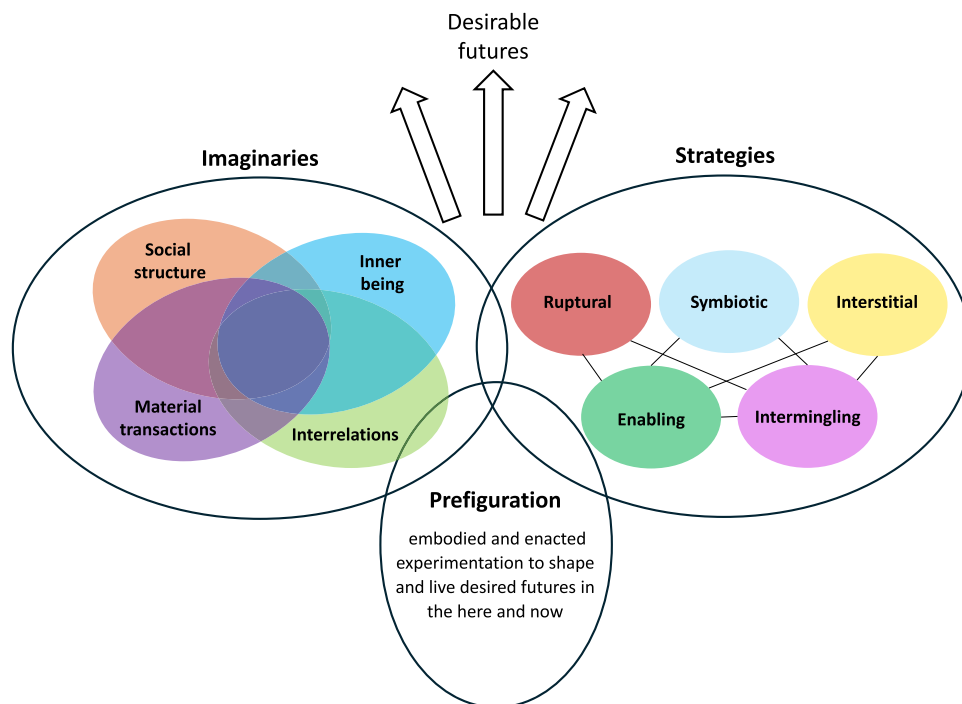


**Fig. 1.** Discourse dynamics framework for hegemony-transcending sustainability transformations. Generalised source domains that are underpinned by mainstream root metaphors can be used to illustrate a given target domain through metaphor vehicles characterised by different dimensions. For example, metaphors that describe transformative strategies through war-related assemblages of words like *smashing down* or *make the system capsiz*e tend to build on generalised domains and hegemonic root metaphors such as argument is war. Metaphors can also explain target domains by mapping from emergent domains and opening for new or reclaimed root metaphors. For instance, imaginaries of societies as *slowly growing oak trees harbouring great diversity* rely on a multi-dimensional metaphor vehicle that builds on pluriversal cosmovisions and might foster the development of new domains and root metaphors connected to relational approaches to sustainability.

metaphors or not (Cameron & Maslen, 2010). Without ruling out the possibility of pre-existence of some conceptual metaphors and related mappings, the framework questions the rigidity of highly generalized and abstract conceptual domains, and sees the connection between linguistic and conceptual metaphors as interaction between language and thinking, where what is said or written both reflects and affects thinking (Cameron et al., 2009; Cameron & Maslen, 2010). This approach allows analysing metaphors with an interactive and recursive process that is not purely top-down (i.e., analysing linguistic metaphors as instantiations of conceptual metaphors) or bottom-up (i.e., analysing the metaphor vehicles inductively, without considering conceptual metaphors), and it allows working with the multiple ways in which metaphors can be used with a complexity or dynamic system perspective (Cameron et al., 2009; Cameron & Maslen, 2010). We adopted the discourse dynamics framework for its systemic approach in a context of sustainability transformations and for its suitability to investigate how metaphors of change can go beyond fixed or hegemonic mappings (Fig. 1).

Specifically, for the identification and analysis of metaphors of change, we used the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) created by the Pragglejaz Group and the developments by Cameron et al. (2009) to better work with discourse dynamics and embedded meanings. Adapting these procedures, we articulated the analysis process in five main steps:

1. To start with, the interviews were anonymised and transcribed, complemented with the anonymous data from the survey and the participatory activity, and discussed among authors to achieve a general understanding and grasp the context where the metaphors were employed.
2. From this data, metaphor vehicle terms were marked out within the text to highlight single words, assemblages of words, and phrases employed to express ideas, concepts, or feelings beyond literal meanings.
3. Then, groupings of related vehicles were created, labelled, coded, and organised in a map to structure the data, focusing on metaphors of change. A summary can be found in the tables in the Appendix. In this phase we worked inductively from the data, considering various possibilities with openness to revisions, splitting, combining, or renaming labels and codes, and re-organising their connections.
4. In next iterative process, the metaphors' topics, domains, and underlying core metaphors were identified and organised in categories, as presented in the tables of the results section. We worked both inductively, inferring from the data, and reductively, observing patterns, regularities, and reasoning into what might have produced them, also associating the empirical findings with the literature. For example, some root metaphors could be associated with pre-existing ones (i.e., social structures as *nested systems* from Davelaar (2021)), while other novel ones emerged from the data.
5. Lastly, we interpreted the metaphors of change found and discussed them with degrowth practitioners and researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the imaginaries of desirable degrowth futures and transformative strategies, including their relation to prefiguration in a context of hegemony-transcending transformations.



**Fig. 2.** Summary of the results. Prefiguration of desirable futures by envisioning different aspects of futures imaginaries and developing coherent transformative strategies to enact and embody such futures in the present.

## 4. Results

Analysing the empirical data, we identified different metaphors of change describing desired outcomes and processes for deep transformations towards just and sustainable futures (Fig. 2). For each metaphor, we highlighted in italics the metaphor vehicles, identified what broader source domains they build on or open up for, and what root metaphors are underneath them. The domains were inductively and retroductively clustered in the following primary domains as structured representations of areas of knowledge or experience: ‘ecological’ encompassing a wide spectrum of phenomena involving living organisms and their physical surroundings; ‘societal’ referring to systemic aspects of human relations and structures; ‘mechanistic’ indicating a cartesian separation of wholes into parts and a tendency to explain phenomena with reference to physical regularities and scientific laws; and ‘war’ characterised by belligerent and antagonistic lenses and approaches, which tend to divide in factions and rely on conflict. With some unavoidable overlaps that show nature-culture hybridity, the metaphors identified can be linked mainly to societal and ecological domains related to interconnectedness, hope, and sustainability. Limited associations are made with mechanistic and war domains, often still connected to more societal or ecological dimensions (e.g., when talking about mechanistic *parts* and *components* to explain interconnectedness between humans and more-than-humans). Within each domain, the root metaphors surfaced have a common focus on plurality and relationality, showing their use in distributed prefiguration across different experiments that try to embody shared ideas of desired transformations in the here-and-now. Addressing the two research questions, the following subsections present different aspects that characterise shared imaginaries of desirable futures (Table 1) and transformative strategies (Table 2). The imaginaries seek to describe transformations and their desired ends from the outset, whereas the strategies are more focused on how desired transformations are enabled and enacted in practice. However, they overall intersect and complement each other in the means-end coherence that characterises prefiguration.

### 4.1. Shared imaginaries of desirable futures

The metaphors of change identified illustrate various imaginaries of desirable futures, partly shared and partly disputed across different contexts and across various currents within the degrowth spectrum (cf. Schmelzer et al., 2022). In order not to be prescriptive but open for plural futures, we present several aspects that, in different combinations, can characterise a variety of imaginaries but do not depict a comprehensive and definitive future vision. Building on a suggestion from some interviewees, we organised the data around the critical realist four-planar model of social being (Bhaskar, 2008) to show how a representation of degrowth futures might look like on the interrelated planes of social structures, peoples’ inner being, social interactions between persons, and material transactions with nature (cf. Buch-Hansen et al., 2024; Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023). We expanded the third plane by adding relations between humans and more-than-humans to accommodate data about interspecies interactions. With more data and more actors involved, different constellations and combinations might emerge and further enrich the framework. For example, we did not find extensive evidence of structural metaphors depicting the political structure or the embedded economy, where there is a prevalence of orientational (e.g., democracies *based on* decentralisation) and ontological metaphors (e.g., economies with a much *smaller*

**Table 1**

The four planes for imaginaries of desirable degrowth futures.

Imaginary	Metaphor of change	Primary metaphor domains	Root metaphor
<b>Social structures</b>	Network structure: <i>a mosaic, puzzle, rhizomatic mycelium, tapestry, bouquet, solidarity net</i> of alternatives Political structure: <i>radical</i> direct or deliberative democracies <i>based on</i> decentralisation, mutual aid, and <i>grassroot</i> decision-making Economic structure: post-capitalist planned and re-localized economies with <i>radical</i> sharing of wealth/scarcity inside and among societies living <i>like snails</i> Socio-cultural structure: free societies with a very <i>rich</i> culture <i>based on</i> a collective ethos, <i>grounded in</i> and <i>embodying</i> humanistic/anarchist/communist values – <i>a slowly growing oak tree harbouring</i> great diversity	Ecological, societal	Structures as supportive nested systems
<b>Inner being</b>	Value-based living: meaningful lifestyles <i>grounded/rooted in</i> and guided by a <i>constellation</i> of humanistic values Inner development: inner <i>growth</i> and <i>flourishing</i> with <i>more</i> time to reflect	Ecological, societal	Inner being as nurtured plants
<b>Interactions between people and with more-than-humans</b>	Embeddedness in nature: <i>interconnected</i> <i>community of life, dependant on/ part of/ attached/ tied to</i> Earth/Gaia/the <i>web of life</i> Social relations: post-capitalist relationships, characterised by <i>deep</i> optimism about humans, <i>horizontalism</i> , similar <i>standards of living</i> and <i>positions of power</i> Relations with more-than-humans: <i>regenerative</i> ways of interacting with the non-human world for a good life for all within <i>planetary boundaries</i>	Societal, (mechanistic)	Interactions as harmonious relations
<b>Material transactions with nature</b>	Embedded economy: <i>regenerative</i> and <i>caring</i> economies with a much <i>smaller</i> <i>throughput</i> , as <i>open subsystems</i> of ecological systems Political economy: democratised participatory economies with <i>emphasis/ focus on</i> social development over economic development	Societal, (mechanistic)	Transactions as ecologies of care

*throughput*) Overall, the metaphors of change can be associated mostly to societal and ecological domains, visualising desirable futures through artistic images and biological associations. Similarly, the root metaphors tend to portray alternatives as plural and nested, life as relational, humans as interconnected with or integral to nature, and culture and values as foundational for just and sustainable futures.

4.1.1. Social structures

Within the plane of social structures, the metaphors of change identified help envision the desired structure of the network of alternatives, as well as the structures of the political, economic, and socio-cultural systems that can support degrowth societies. Based on a core metaphor of nested systems (cf. Davelaar, 2021), these dimensions are interrelated and manifest at different levels, connecting societal, ecological, and mechanistic domains mostly through metaphors that describe deep change as *radical* or *at the roots*.

Considering the first structure, most degrowth members position the movement within a network of pluriversal alternatives seen as plural and complementary parts of a bigger whole, which co-exist, interact, and support each other. The metaphors suggest associations with compositions of heterogeneous elements such as *beautiful mosaics*, *tapestries*, *rhizomatic mycelium networks*, *complementary puzzle pieces*, *bouquet of flowers*, and *strong nets* to guarantee basic human needs with solidarity. Zooming in on degrowth societies, most of the metaphors describe a political structure of decentralised self-governing societies operating through direct or deliberative democracy. Several orientational metaphors are used to illustrate how degrowth communities *place trust* in *grassroots* democracy, bring people *closer* to politics and community and are *rooted in* autonomy, sufficiency, and care. Similarly, the economic structure places emphasis on the need for *deep* transformations in terms of *radical* post-capitalist re-localized economies sharing wealth inside and among countries, living in *radical* frugal abundance, and having universal basic services as *foundations*. The key metaphor here describes the economy as a *snail* or a *turtle* that goes ahead slowly, carries its home on the back, and knows when to stop growing. Lots of ontological metaphors are used with a quantifying function, such as *less* work, or *more* time for transformation. Some orientational metaphors are employed to describe the directionality of change (e.g., a post-growth orientation with the doughnut economics model as a *map* and its seven principles as *compass*). Lastly, also the socio-cultural structure envisions *deeply* transformed societies *based on a*

**Table 2**  
Strategies for degrowth transformations.

Transformation strategy	Metaphor of change	Primary metaphor domains	Root metaphor		
	Approach to change	How to make change happen	Transformations		
<b>Symbiotic</b>	Change never happens in a vacuum or from a blank slate, it requires <i>making compromises, recalibrating what exists, composting, and shedding skin to breathe again</i>	<i>Influence</i> decision -making through <i>coalitions</i> of governments, businesses, and civil society for a <i>mixture</i> of institutional reforms <i>towards growth independence</i>	<i>Growth</i> in more equal structures that <i>implement upper limits</i> for wealth and resource use, and <i>expand</i> public goods/ services	Mechanistic, ecological	Change as a constructive and incremental process
<b>Ruptural</b>	A <i>rupture</i> with the growth society to realise the <i>revolutionary potential</i> of degrowth by <i>fighting/ disrupting/ dismantling/ smashing/ capsizing</i> capitalism	Be both <i>inside and outside</i> of the State by amassing <i>power</i> in society, <i>attacking</i> the centre of power, <i>taking power</i> in the State, and <i>building</i> alternatives	Global institutions that <i>embody</i> "revolutionary realpolitik", <i>strong</i> financial regulations and modern monetary policies, <i>execution</i> of democratic participation	War, mechanistic	Change as a conflictual and oppositional process
<b>Interstitial</b>	<i>Exit/ get out of/ walk away from</i> capitalism, and <i>rebuild</i> another world/ other worlds from the <i>margins</i>	<i>Prefigure outside</i> of the system with <i>means consistent with the ends</i> by <i>walking the talk</i> , and <i>experimenting from below/ nurturing</i> alternatives, and <i>taking power away</i> from markets and States	<i>Radical redistribution</i> of power <i>towards the many, going beyond</i> representative democracy via citizens' assemblies, and <i>going beyond</i> money with non-monetary economies and relations	Ecological, societal	Change as a radical process outside of the system
<b>Intermingling</b>	<i>Join futures/ create bridges/ hold hands</i> across alternatives to <i>plant seeds</i> for change without acting like one <i>organism</i>	<i>Bring in conversation/ combine</i> perspectives/ <i>connect/link/ build alliances</i> with other movements, <i>explore alternative paths</i> , <i>imagine place sensible varieties</i> of degrowth	A <i>strong net of interdependent</i> communities that can provide re-organization towards desirable futures, and infrastructures for a good life for all within <i>planetary boundaries</i>	Ecological, societal	Change as a collaborative and plural process
<b>Enabling</b>	<i>Inner growth and development</i> towards an empathic and collaborative species for <i>deep</i> transformations that bring <i>profound</i> changes in society	Learning and <i>consientisation, creative spaces</i> to think of futures, <i>adopt different worldviews</i> and <i>modes</i> of being in the world, <i>dance into the chaos</i> , <i>shift</i> narratives, and <i>open up</i> for cultural transformation	A <i>groundbreaking mental shift to transform the bottom of the iceberg</i> by <i>reinventing</i> ourselves/ <i>rebuilding</i> identities <i>guided by</i> values and principles of care, gentleness, love for others and nature	Societal, ecological	Change as inner transformation and agency development, enlightenment

collective ethos, and it calls for *radical* cultural change. The latter is expected to generate cultural *blooming* for rich cultures that place at the heart and embody humanistic, anarchist, and socialist values, like an *old slowly growing oak tree harbouring great diversity*.

#### 4.1.2. Inner being

When imagining how people's inner being would be in desirable futures, several members of the degrowth movement use metaphors related to the ecological domain, which describe thriving, well-nurtured plants. Through the lenses of this core metaphor, the inner being is seen as *rooted* in values and developing through inner *growth* for human *flourishing* or *blossoming*.

Starting from the *seeds* for value-based living, a *constellation* of values (e.g., equality, conviviality, fairness, care, gentleness, frugality, or solidarity) is suggested as the *foundations* or *roots* for *deep* transformations *grounded* or *rooted* in values that highlight humanness, human potential, and agency. Some orientational metaphors are used for the direction of change, pointing to values *towards* immaterial things, together with ontological metaphors that reduce undesirable aspects, like *less* consumerism, and expand desirable ones, like *more* generativity. From these seeds, imaginaries of inner development are characterised by huge amounts of *growth within souls* and *within hearts*, towards a *flourishing* of people with *more* meaningful lives. People will have *more* space and free time with a *slower pace* of life to *grow* as persons, *deeply* reflect, develop their creativity and promote their personal wellbeing.

#### 4.1.3. Interactions between people and with more-than-humans

Central in the imaginaries about interactions lies the metaphor of *harmonious co-existence with ourselves as individuals, with other human beings, and with nature*. Stemming from the concept of harmony in music, this root metaphor connects societal domains and describes the positioning of humans in nature, the relationship between people and with more-than-humans.

Considering the position of humans in nature, the metaphors of change identified open for imaginaries of *interconnectedness*, and *embeddedness* or *oneness*, where humans are seen as *part of* nature or directly as nature. These metaphors simultaneously draw on and further the ecological domain with biological associations to other beings and the planet, as well as hinting to mechanistic processes of connecting in an interwoven web. Discussing *man's place in the web of life*, degrowth societies are presented as living *within the geographical limits, down to Earth, tied or attached to it, interdependent* on other social relations and the *community of life*. Within such community, the relations between people are characterised by *deep* optimism and *horizontalism*, with similar standards of living and similar *positions* of power. Capitalism would not be *present* in human relationships and there would be public *spaces* for interaction that are convivial, communal, and fun. These orientational metaphors are complemented by ontological ones that once again emphasise the desire for slower societies with for example *more* time for collective wellbeing. Similarly, the relations with more-than-humans would aim at ensuring *planetary health* and a good life for all *within planetary boundaries*. Connecting with the societal domain, the metaphors of change here suggest *regenerative* ways of interacting, that *treasure* nature and *celebrate* other animals and plants.

#### 4.1.4. Material transactions with nature

The last plane, describes material transactions with nature as interactions and intra-actions in ecologies of care (Curandi et al., 2022), where the economy is embedded in nature and is organised through a participatory political economy. The metaphors of change are related to societal and mechanistic domains that complement and enrich the prevalence of mappings from the ecological domain used to describe the economic structure in the first plane.

Starting from the embedded economy, *open economic systems* are seen as *open subsystem* of social and ecological systems. The economic sphere is positioned within social and ecological spheres, following an approach typical of ecological economics (see Passet, 1995). Shifting to this perspective would allow adopting *radically* different imaginaries of *social metabolism*, transitioning to *regenerative* and *caring* economies with a much *smaller throughput*, and providing better and *simpler* lifestyles based on *less* resource depletion. At the same time, it would also require *accepting limits* that nature imposes, not *destroying* the preconditions for our lives, *reducing harm* to our ecological system, while *ensuring* a good quality of life for everyone. Considering the political economy of the social sphere in which the economy is embedded, the governance of the material transactions with nature would be *based on* participatory ecological planning. In this planning, everyone would *have a great say* in how to organise production, *set limits* democratically, and democratically *reduce* energy and resource throughput. Some suggest a *shift* to non-monetary economies, while others imagine that markets should take up *less* space. For some, the economy should *build on* collective sufficiency. For others, it would benefit from *growth in* renewable technologies and in companies oriented towards sustainability. Overall agreement is found in the *emphasis on* social rather than economic development and politicization or democratization of the economy.

## 4.2. Strategies for transformations towards just and sustainable futures

Analysing and classifying the data, we found empirical grounding and evidence that can further support and enrich the growing debate around transformative strategies in the degrowth literature (e.g., Barlow, 2019; Barlow et al., 2022; Bärnthaler, 2024; D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Feola, 2025; Kallis et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Treu et al., 2020). From the metaphors of change identified, similarities emerge with Wright (2010)'s strategies of emancipatory transformation to transcend capitalism, namely *symbiotic* strategies envisioning a gradual metamorphosis of current institutions; *ruptural* strategies aiming to create new institutions after a rupture with existing ones; and *interstitial* strategies which develop parallel alternatives at the margins of capitalist societies. We maintained this categorisation and borrowed from degrowth and transformations literature to expand it with *intermingling* strategies (cf. Herbert et al., 2021) characterised by collaboration across alternatives, and *enabling* strategies (cf. Scoones et al., 2020) focused on empowerment and inner transformation. For each category, we analysed the general approach to change, how change is planned, and what transformations would accompany the desired change. Although there is some variation within and divergence among some strategies,

the two additional categories are more cross-cutting and offer common ground for distributed prefiguration, reconnecting with the prevalence of mappings from societal and ecological domains in the imaginaries, as well as drawing on relational root metaphors.

#### 4.2.1. Symbiotic strategies

The symbiotic strategies draw on a non-reformist reformative approach (see Gorz, 1968; Kallis et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022) that sees change as an incremental and constructive process of developing institutional capabilities, while transforming existing structures over time without drastic ruptures. With projections to the mechanistic, societal, and ecological domains, the metaphors describe change as never starting *in a vacuum* or *from a blank slate*. It is rather a process of *bedding, composting, and growing new roots*, or a *snake shedding its skin*. The symbiotic approach assumes that making violent resistance will lead to *negative impressions* among the general public, and rather suggests *recalibrating* what already exists, *tidying up a lot of shit*, and *making compromises* with the world as it is, while striving to transform it.

This gradual metamorphosis of the system is described through building-related mechanistic metaphors that create associations with processes of renovation and construction. For example, they suggest working with institutions that are *worth building on*, with a *mixture of institutional non-reformist reforms towards growth independence* or at least less growth dependence, and promoting change *within* organizations with new structures that can change business as usual. At a political level, the symbiotic approach aims to create *coalitions of governments, businesses, and civil society* advocating for change, *influence* decision-making, and at the same time *push* the State to expand spaces and organisations outside of itself. The desired transformations include *growth* in more equal social structures including workers unions, an *expansion* of the commons, public goods and services, and the introduction of a democratic world government that *implements upper limits* for wealth and resource use.

#### 4.2.2. Ruptural strategies

The ruptural strategies adopt an insurrectional revolutionary approach grounded in a root metaphor that presents change as an agonistic process. Building on the war domain, the metaphors identified push for the *rejection of and rupture with the growth society* to realise the *revolutionary potential* of degrowth. Prioritising *political fight*, the ruptural approach advocates for the *disruption* of unsustainable structures and the *dismantlement* of destructive systems to make the exploitative system *capsize or collapse* and *stop* the growth hegemony.

To make change happen, the war metaphors outline destructive and constructive phases. The destructive phase consists of *attacks* to the core centre of power in the global north *with huge numbers* and violence, a general strike to *unseat* the plutocrats and oligarchs, *uprisings* from the civil society, and different forms of direct action *ranging from* joining social movements to divestment, sanctions, and sabotage of capitalist interests. In the constructive phase, the degrowth movement should *build* the alternatives and then, when the *time comes in favour*, *use the wave to build momentum*. For this, the movement should *amass* power in society, *organize* people and *spread the word* and ideas of degrowth by *developing* and *building* strong social movements, unions, and an *opposition block* within the richer economies, while trying to *influence* parties and *take power* in the State, being both *outside* and *inside* of it. The related desired transformations encompass different dimensions. At the political level, the metaphors are used to suggest a range of transformations from the establishment of global institutions that *embody* a revolutionary realpolitik, to the *abolition* of elections, *replacement* with sortition, and *execution* of democratic participation. At the economic and financial levels, different strategies suggest either to *subvert* money and fossil economies or the introduction of monetary policies to *end* imperial arrangements of unequal exchange, and strong regulations on transnational financial capital to *stop the capture* of societal assets by economic elites and the *accumulation* of wealth and power *in the hands of a few*.

#### 4.2.3. Interstitial strategies

The interstitial strategies are mainly inspired by the anarchist approach of creating radical change *outside of* the system, by building parallel preferable alternatives from the bottom up and avoiding direct confrontation. With a mix of orientational metaphors and metaphors from the mechanistic domain, interstitial approaches to change recommend *pulling the emergency break*, *giving up* on and *exiting* capitalism and the dependence on the State, *walking away from the overheated engine*, *getting out* of a world that is heading towards disaster and rather *rebuilding* another world or other worlds *at the margins*.

When it comes to enacting change, the interstitial strategies rely extensively on *prefigurative* politics, with means *consistent with* the ends and a *two-levelled* approach at the levels of imagination and practice to *walk the talk* and *be the change one wants to see in the world*. With *crazy democratic experimentation* and innovation, this approach focuses on *thinking out of the box*, trying alternatives, and *adjusting* what works to create and use solutions *from below* wherever there is *room for action*. With mappings from ecological, societal, and mechanistic domains, this approach to change *nurtures* alternatives, *supports* post-capitalist experiences, and lets them *unfold*. In political terms, it manifests through frugal-living people *stepping into* civil disobedience, as well as social movement organizing to create autonomy and *take power away* from markets and States. The metaphors of change used depict again *deep* transformations *grounded* in *radical* redistribution of power to give political power *towards the many* and live and behave in *radically* different ways. The need to transcend hegemony is also expressed by orientational metaphors that describe desired transformations in the political and economic spheres, such as *going beyond* representative democracy via citizens' assemblies and *going beyond* money with non-monetary economies and relations.

#### 4.2.4. Intermingling strategies

The intermingling strategies focus on collaboration across alternatives to open for plural desirable futures and stimulate the co-creation of change. The metaphors of change used to illustrate this draw on and open up for societal, ecological, and mechanistic

domains to *look for ways* in which different futures could be *joined together* without acting like one *organism*. By *replacing* the idea of independency with *interdependency*, the intermingling approach aims to *create bridges between* or *hold hands across* alternatives while *planting seeds* for change.

A rich set of metaphors describes how to enable the desired changes together. Diverse, *queer*, and collective futures should be envisioned in a participatory way, imagining different *varieties of degrowth* and *exploring alternative paths* and *multiple ways forward*. Degrowth needs to be *place sensible*, *speak to* institutions, people, ideas in particular locations. The movement should also *connect with* other pluriversal alternatives, be *brought in conversation* with indigenous concepts, *relate to* alterglobalism, post- or anti-development, decoloniality, and feminism, *combine* the local and global perspective, and *build alliances* with other heterodox movements. In terms of political strategies, this requires *growing out of* the existing academic studies to engage more people with *grassroots* outreach and educational offerings, *build* and *link* social movements, and become a *diverse majority movement*. Considering the related transformations, alternative movements aim to unlock futures that *overcome* current problems. Societal and mechanistic mappings are used to express these multifaceted transformations involving the network structure (e.g., a *strong net* that can provide re-organization, public and/or common *infrastructures* for a good life for all *within planetary boundaries*), interrelations (e.g., emancipation *built within* the *interdependence* between human communities and more-than-humans), and international politics (e.g., indigenous people *having seats at the table*).

#### 4.2.5. Enabling strategies

The enabling strategies focus on inner transformations. They are based on the idea that changes in societal structures need to be combined with *deeper* changes in culture, values, and ideologies *at the bottom of the iceberg*, which require the development of agency and capabilities at the individual level. Several metaphors with mappings from societal and inner domains, claim that change needs to happen *within ourselves* first as *inner development* or *growth* in our inner being, to produce *deep* transformations and *profound* changes in society.

Enabling approaches use metaphors in the societal domain related to education and *conscientisation* to open *creative spaces* to think about futures, foster *shifts in mindsets*, *view reality differently*, and *open up* for cultural transformation, while *dancing into the chaos*. This work on *mental structures* should allow *untangling* the social imaginary in the minds, *emancipating from* destructive ideologies, *converting away from* economic dogmatism, and *escaping* economism. Those who managed to *free* themselves can become *liberators* of the *slaves* of the growth-economy and *lead by example*, for instance by diminishing their *carbon footprint*, *stopping at enough*, *stepping out of* earth-damaging jobs and becoming *earth-carers*, *digging into* the mess, and *investing in* regenerating community. Particular attention is given to *shifting* the narratives needed to understand the world and transform it (e.g., *shifting* to a narrative of wellbeing that is not based on materialism). The related transformations involve *ground-breaking mental shifts*, *regained* common sense or wisdom, *rebuild* identities, and the development of *guiding principles* (e.g., love for nature and for the planet) and *guiding values* (e.g., care for the world, gentleness in the interactions with other humans and with nature).

## 5. Discussion

Below we discuss the metaphors of change used by the degrowth movement as identified in the empirical analysis and put those in relation to distributed prefiguration and transformations. The aim is to surface tendencies that can inspire reflections on the use of metaphors in theory and practice. The means – end coherence that characterises prefiguration is examined by exploring how the metaphors used to describe imaginaries (ends) and transformative strategies (means) are consistent, without claiming any definite matching between them. Metaphors of change are considered as both plural and deeply shared symbolic framings, devices, and practices that underpin how change and futures are understood, enacted and so, prefigured. Building on [Oomen et al. \(2022\)](#), metaphors can serve as future-cultural codes, embedded in social practices and classifying what is deemed legitimate or illegitimate, part or not part of desirable futures, and thus shaping the landscape of imagination as well as action.

Our empirical analysis arrived at four planes of imaginaries (social structures, inner being, interrelations, and material transactions with nature), and five types of strategies (symbiotic, ruptural, interstitial, intermingling, and enabling). Across the imaginaries, metaphors referring to entities such as snails, roots, mosaics, webs of life, and flourishing seeds enable the articulation of various forms of transformation. For example, when social structures are portrayed as mosaics or webs, they indicate decentralised, non-hierarchical, and relational designs. These imaginaries relate to the interstitial and intermingling logics, where plural alternatives are viewed as co-existing and overlapping. Considering another example, several metaphors in the inner being imaginary evoke enabling strategies aimed towards personal development, agency and systemic transformation. Here, change is cultivated through care, reflection and self-transformation as a precondition for wider societal change. Then, the relations with humans and more-than-humans are depicted through ecological metaphors that capture issues of embeddedness and reciprocity. These point toward both enabling and intermingling strategies, positioning humans as part of a larger web of life. Similarly, also the imaginaries for the material transactions with nature draw from metaphors of embeddedness, viewing economies as subsystems of ecological systems, yet a plurality of approaches within and across strategies describes how to get to different economic and political systems.

The planes of the imaginaries depict a composite and multifaceted picture that seems to be shared across different contexts, with some examples of real-existing degrowth focusing more on some aspects or on other ones. The strategies for how to achieve desired outcomes present more variation and divergence. The ruptural, symbiotic, and interstitial strategies suggest coherent means in alignment with different political orientations when it comes to governance structures, the role of State, institutions, and civil society, as discussed in degrowth literature and debates (e.g., [Barlow et al., 2022](#); [D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020](#); [Gasparro & Vico, 2025](#); [Schmelzer et al., 2022](#)). The two additional categories of intermingling and enabling strategies are cross-cutting and invite for distributed

prefiguration. In particular, the intermingling strategy supports different movements in overcoming polarisation (e.g., what Gasparro and Vico 2025 describe metaphorically as ‘work towards a kintsugi that takes us beyond old fractures’) and coming together around pluriversal visions of social-ecological transformation rather than a specific political tradition (cf. Herbert et al., 2021). Similarly, there is broad consensus that shifts in socio-economic institutions must be accompanied by shifts in cultural habits, values and ideologies (cf. Latouche, 2010; Meissner, 2021) which makes the enabling strategies foundational in various currents of the degrowth movement. Interestingly, most of the metaphors of change employed across imaginaries and strategies draw on ecological and societal source domains and relational root metaphors, which differ significantly from the more mechanistic or war metaphors that are prevalent in the mainstream paradigms criticised. Minor references to mechanistic domains are common across the various categories, while war metaphors are extensively used in the ruptural strategies.

As the metaphorical framing of change is not neutral, the above-mentioned prevalence and distribution of certain domains and root metaphors in relation to mainstream or alternative paradigms raise critical questions about the transformative power of different metaphors. A first question concerns the relationship between degrowth metaphors and the hegemonic discourse criticised. According to Schoppek (2020), degrowth discourses can be differentiated in counter-hegemonic and sub-hegemonic. The latter can be exemplified by metaphors that describe transformations as a *snake shedding skin* and inadvertently stabilise or reinforce hegemony by addressing symptoms and not root causes of problems. How can metaphors be used as discursive devices that can rearticulate common senses and produce imaginaries and strategies to transcend hegemony? Moreover, some metaphors like *back to candlelight* or *the slaves of the growth-economy* might describe the past in idyllic terms or have exclusionary tendencies, which can raise concerns associated with far-right visions of degrowth (cf. Forchtner & Olsen, 2024). While being open to intermingling approaches in trying to find ways of living together on a common planet, how can metaphors be used consistently to navigate desirable transformations guided by shared values? In this regard, Hurtado Hurtado and Glynos (2025) show that affective investments in transformative efforts are structured by fantasy and its ‘grip’ on actors: engagement can be ideological when subjects are over-invested in a fantasy, or ethical when subjects cultivate a prefigurative ethics to deal with the contingency of futures (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). How to engage with degrowth metaphors, imaginaries, and strategies with reflexivity and openness to the emergence of alternative social orders and not in a polarising over-invested manner?

We hope that these insights and open questions about the metaphors of change, metaphorical domains, and root metaphors used in the degrowth movement can inspire reflections around the associated language and cognitive frames that characterise different imaginaries and strategies, when it comes to their potential to reinforce, reproduce, or transcend hegemony. As the latter is rooted in the repetition of everyday practices and discourses, a variety of alternative common senses can also be generated, consolidated, and rearticulated through material and symbolic practices that question acritical repetition and prefigure desirable futures (cf. Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Butler et al., 2000; D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; García López et al., 2017). Prefigurative theories and practices have historically focused more on emancipatory ends and on interstitial and enabling means, where embodied learning processes enable social, intellectual, and affective engagement from below. However, the alternative common sense prefigured can also help develop agency to create the cultural bases for either ruptures with the current system or symbiotic co-existence at its margin (cf. Ketonen-Oksi & Vignen, 2024; Schwittay, 2025). Furthermore, working with intermingling strategies at the level of culture and deep values across alternatives is recognised as important for different prefigurative experiments to co-create sufficiently shared hegemonic-transcending worldviews, and evolve within, despite, and beyond mainstream paradigms (Monticelli & Escobar, 2024).

Within the degrowth movement, various common senses, practices, and discourses are developed in different contexts, yet they often share common directions and/or transformational approaches. This can be understood through the lenses of the *supreme dilemma of the pluriverse* of combining diversity and unity (cf. Gills & Hosseini, 2022). Velotti et al. (2024) suggest that unity in diversity can in some cases be achieved through the practice of *hegemony of non-hegemony* that respects diversity while fostering collaboration. In our study, this manifests in the quest for a variety of hegemony-transcending transformations that share some aspects of imaginaries of desirable futures and intermingle strategies to embody those futures in the present. These findings resonate with ongoing debates in pluriversal and futures research on how to approach radical diversity, the inherent unknowability of futures and the conservative biases in their links to hegemonic presents, while still maintaining some sense of shared transformative directionality (cf. Barrineau et al., 2022; Buckton et al., 2024; Muiderman et al., 2023). Distributed prefiguration within the degrowth movement operates within this tension. It may overcome it not by promoting universal plans and blueprints, but by enacting futures as plural and possible to actualise through the embodiment of a diverse array of overlapping and resonant imaginaries and strategies (cf. Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Future research could further explore this potential and co-create novel metaphorical landscapes through transdisciplinary co-production and worldmaking experiments. These could help surface, evaluate, and critique current metaphors used in both mainstream and alternative discourses, as well as testing and potentially disseminating new metaphors to transcend problematic common senses. Particular attention could be dedicated to co-develop new metaphors that are systemic, affective and apt (cf. Flusberg & Thibodeau, 2023), and that can be engaged with through the openness and reflexivity of prefigurative ethics (cf. Hurtado Hurtado & Glynos, 2025) to radically transform the ways we think, act, and relate. Furthermore, investigating material and affective resonance of metaphors in real-existing or living degrowth prefigurative practices could help deepen understanding how degrowth life is walked and made, and inspire other movements.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, we integrated transformation studies with cognitive metaphor theory and the pluriversal turn in futures thinking to analyse how metaphors can prefigure. Specifically, we looked at how metaphors of change are used in the degrowth movement to

embody and enact desirable futures in the present in different contexts.

We worked with the discourse dynamics framework to examine metaphors as both analytical and performative devices in the prefiguration of hegemony-transcending futures. Building on conceptual metaphor theory to engage deep leverages of transformation, the approach added the possibility to question hegemonic mappings and open up for new ways of using metaphor vehicles, create, or question domains and root metaphors. Furthermore, the framework suggests a shift from seeing metaphors as static and fixed mappings to novel possibilities open to change, which emerge from the activity of interconnected systems of socially situated language use and cognitive activity taking place in broader cultural landscapes.

With this perspective, we identified and mapped what and how shared imaginaries and transformation strategies are structured by different metaphors of change, highlighting coherence without closure in the movement. This unity within diversity, which embraces plurality but suggests shared directionality, is enabled by the use of metaphors as linguistic, cognitive, and affective devices. Linking different metaphors with the processes of change to bring about desired imaginaries, our study suggests that the degrowth metaphors show coherence between ends and means for hegemony-transcending transformations in particular when they build on and open up for mappings mostly from ecological and societal domains, with connection to relational root metaphors.

We hope that by eliciting imaginaries and transformation strategies (Table 1 and Table 2), the rich metaphorical repertoire, and some reflections and questions in the discussion can inform work in degrowth and related movements or inspire individuals aiming for socio-ecological transformations. This research can be considered a starting point to discuss current framings and the common senses accepted or challenged, and to explore new ways of using metaphors to deeply transform the ways of thinking and acting in prefigurative efforts.

**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Cyprien Brabant:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Johan Holmén:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Clara Saggiotti:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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**Appendix**

Imaginary aspect	Structure	Metaphors of change
Societal structures	Network structure	Pluriversal alternatives like a beautiful <i>mosaic</i> A <i>tapestry</i> of alternatives <i>Rhizomatic mycelium networks</i> Complementary <i>puzzle pieces</i> A <i>bouquet of flowers</i>
	Political structure	A <i>strong net</i> that can guarantee all the basic human needs with solidarity Self-governing societies <i>based on decentralisation</i> , workers’ control, mutual aid The political dimension of a free society <i>based on</i> autonomy, sufficiency, and care (i.e., anarchism) <i>coupled with</i> the economic dimension of each according to their ability and each according to their needs (i.e., communism) <i>Place</i> a lot of trust in deliberative democracy Local decision-making, decisions <i>brought closer</i> to the people affected by them <i>Rooted in real</i> (direct) democracy <i>Grassroot</i> decision-making

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Imaginary aspect	Structure	Metaphors of change
	Economic structure	<p>Post-Capitalist planned and re-localized economies with <i>radical</i> sharing of wealth/scarcity inside and among countries</p> <p>A <i>circle</i>: degrowth as a <i>regeneration or cure for a disease</i></p> <p>Live with <i>radical/frugal abundance</i> in terms of economy</p> <p>Degrowth societies as <i>snails</i></p> <p>Aesop story about <i>rabbit and turtle</i></p> <p>A <i>slower</i> society with a good <i>rhythm</i>: a society with less work, more spaces for <i>soft transformation</i></p> <p>More <i>distributed</i> work, shorter working week</p> <p><i>Needs-based</i> societies</p> <p>Societies where production is mostly <i>oriented</i> to use</p> <p>Universal basic services as <i>foundations</i></p> <p>No people living <i>below</i> the poverty line</p> <p>The doughnut model as a <i>map</i> and the 7 principles as <i>compass</i></p>
	Socio-cultural structure	<p>A big, huge, old, <i>slowly growing oak tree</i>, <i>harbouring</i> great diversity</p> <p><i>Regenerative cultures v. monoculture</i></p> <p>Societies <i>grounded</i> in autonomy, sufficiency and care</p> <p><i>Radical</i> cultural and ethical change</p> <p>Cultural <i>blooming</i></p> <p>Autonomy, democracy, relationality and reciprocity <i>at the heart of</i> cultures</p> <p>Free societies that <i>embody</i> anarchist communist values</p> <p>Very <i>rich</i> culture</p> <p>A society <i>based on</i> a collective ethos rather than an individualistic ethos</p>
Inner being	Value-based living	<p>An anthropological dimension to <i>build, give foundations, roots</i> and <i>depth</i> to the degrowth project</p> <p>A humanistic approach <i>grounded in</i> values, which <i>highlights</i> humanness, human potential and agency</p> <p><i>Constellation</i> of values (equality, equity, conviviality, fairness, care, gentleness, justice, sustainability, nature-love, consent, sufficiency, autonomy, mutual aid, sincerity, trust, freedom, solidarity)</p> <p>Generativity for a <i>flourishing</i> nature that <i>supports</i> humanity</p> <p>Lifestyles <i>rooted in</i> sufficiency and frugality</p> <p>Predominantly values <i>towards</i> immaterial things (e.g. care) and less consumism</p>
	Inner development	<p>Huge amounts of <i>growth</i> within our soul and within our hearts</p> <p>A <i>flourishing</i> of people's creativity</p> <p><i>Deeply</i> reflecting people with more meaningful lives</p> <p>Space and time to <i>grow</i> as persons</p> <p>Slower <i>pace</i> of life with more free time</p> <p>Life feels slower and people are <i>time-rich</i></p> <p><i>More time dedicated</i> to personal wellbeing (whatever makes people happy and <i>shine</i>)</p>
Interactions between people and with more-than-humans	Embeddedness in nature	<p>A new/old spiritual concept of <i>being part of the Biosphere (Gaia)</i>, "<i>coming (back) home</i>" as a species: back to the geo-physical limits, the countryside, ourselves, our communities, Gaia</p> <p>Human life as <i>attached or tied</i> to Earth and its limits</p> <p><i>Down to earth</i></p> <p>Recognise <i>oneness</i> or acknowledge that we are all <i>interconnected</i></p> <p>A feeling of <i>connection</i> and love between people in your community and the world, as well as nature and animals</p> <p>Recognise human <i>dependence</i> on natural systems</p> <p><i>Highly interdependent</i> life on other social relations and the environment</p> <p>Man's place in the <i>web of life</i></p> <p>Freedom within a <i>community of humans and more-than-humans</i></p> <p>Care and respect for the <i>community of life</i></p> <p>Future is <i>green</i></p>
	Relations between people	<p>Co-exist in <i>harmony</i> with other humans</p> <p>Live in <i>harmony</i> with ourselves as individuals and others</p> <p>Capitalism would not <i>be present</i> in human relationships, nor in the <i>time we spend</i> throughout our day, and everyone would work in a job useful to society and their neighbours</p> <p>More time <i>dedicated</i> to collective wellbeing (volunteering for instance)</p> <p><i>Deep</i> optimism about humans</p> <p><i>Slow</i> friendship</p> <p><i>Horizontalism</i></p> <p>People having similar <i>standards of living</i> and similar <i>positions of power</i></p> <p>Really nice <i>public spaces</i> that are convivial, communal, and fun</p> <p>Sharing and potlatch <i>gift-giving feasts</i></p>
	Relations with more-than-humans	<p>Co-exist in <i>harmony</i> with more-than-humans</p> <p>Live in <i>harmony</i> with nature</p> <p>Good life for all within <i>planetary boundaries</i></p> <p><i>Planetary health</i></p> <p><i>Regenerative</i> ways of interacting with non-human world</p> <p><i>The calm after the storm</i></p>

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Imaginary aspect	Structure	Metaphors of change
Material transactions with nature	Embedded economy	<p>Celebrate what it is not only to be human, but also <i>celebrate</i> other animals, plants and landscapes</p> <p><i>Treasure</i> a lot more nature</p> <p><i>Open systems</i> for the economy as an <i>open subsystem</i> of ecological systems</p> <p><i>Radically</i> different imaginaries of <i>social metabolism</i></p> <p>Reduce <i>harm</i> to our ecological system</p> <p><i>Accept</i> that there are <i>limits</i> that nature imposes onto us</p> <p>Try not to <i>destroy</i> the preconditions for our lives</p> <p><i>Diminish</i> anthropogenic sources of climate change, diminish overall energy use, while <i>ensuring</i> good quality of life for everyone</p> <p>Provide better lifestyles with <i>less</i> resource depletion</p> <p><i>Regenerative</i> and <i>caring</i> economies with a much <i>smaller throughput</i></p> <p><i>An adaptive cycle</i></p> <p>A world where everything is a lot more durable, where we are much more <i>focused on</i> repairing things and living more simply</p> <p><i>Back to candlelight, to the past</i> and how people ate and lived before industrial growth</p>
	Political economy	<p><i>Emphasis on</i> social development rather than economic development and politicization/democratization of the economy</p> <p><i>Democratically reduce</i> energy and resource throughput</p> <p><i>Set priorities</i> democratically within democratically set <i>limits</i></p> <p>All <i>have a great say</i> in how we produce things</p> <p><i>Participatory ecological planning</i></p> <p>A community <i>mode</i> of production and non-monetary economies</p> <p>Markets will probably <i>take up</i> less space</p> <p>An economy that <i>builds on</i> collective sufficiency</p> <p>We need <i>growth</i> in renewable technologies and in particular types of companies</p>

Transformation strategy	Metaphor of change		
	Approach to change	How to make change happen	Transformations
Symbiotic	<p>Start not from a <i>blank slate</i></p> <p>Social change never happens in a <i>vacuum</i></p> <p><i>Tidy up</i> a lot of <i>shit</i></p> <p><i>Make compromises</i> with the world as it is, while striving to transform it</p> <p><i>Recalibrate</i> what already exists</p> <p>Making violent resistance to the system will <i>lead to</i> negative <i>impressions</i> among the general public</p> <p><i>Composting, bedding in, rooting</i></p> <p><i>A snake shedding its skin so breathe again</i></p>	<p>Change <i>within</i> organizations (changing <i>business as usual</i>) and a political level, <i>creating the structures</i> that allows this type of change to happen by <i>expanding</i> democracy</p> <p>A <i>mixture</i> of institutional reforms <i>towards</i> growth <i>independence</i> or at least less growth dependence</p> <p>Work with institutions that are <i>worth building</i> on</p> <p><i>Coalitions</i> of governments, businesses, and civil society <i>advocating for</i> change</p> <p><i>Influence</i> decision-making</p> <p><i>Push</i> the state to <i>expand</i> spaces and organisations outside the state</p>	<p><i>Growth</i> in more equal social structures</p> <p><i>Grow</i> worker unions and syndicates</p> <p><i>Expand</i> the commons, public goods and services</p> <p>Democratic world government <i>implements upper limits</i> for wealth and resource use</p>
Ruptural	<p>Realise the <i>revolutionary potential</i> of degrowth transformations</p> <p><i>Rejection</i> of and <i>rupture</i> with the growth society</p> <p><i>Disruption</i> of unsustainable structures</p> <p><i>Dismantlement</i> of destructive systems</p> <p>Make the exploitative system <i>capsize</i></p> <p>Make the capitalistic system <i>collapse</i> and <i>stop</i> the growth hegemony</p> <p><i>Smash down</i> the system</p> <p>Prioritise political <i>fight</i></p>	<p><i>Attack</i> the core centre of power in the global north with huge numbers and violence</p> <p>A general strike to <i>unseat</i> the plutocrats and oligarchs</p> <p><i>Uprisings</i> from civil society organizations and 'the people'</p> <p>Direct action <i>ranging</i> from joining social movements to blockades, divestment, sanctions, and strategic sabotage of capitalist interests</p> <p><i>Amass power</i> in society to make the huge changes needed for degrowth</p> <p>Organizing people and <i>spreading</i> the word and ideas of degrowth</p> <p><i>Build</i> the alternatives and then, when the time comes in our favour, <i>use the wave to build momentum</i></p> <p>Develop <i>strong</i> social movements and unions organizing to <i>oppose</i> capital in the search for degrowth</p> <p><i>Build</i> broad movements and people power, but at the same time try to <i>influence</i> parties and <i>take power</i> in the state</p> <p>Be both <i>outside</i> and <i>inside</i> the state</p>	<p>Global institutions that <i>embody</i> "revolutionary realpolitik" by <i>connecting</i> everyday provisioning and structural reforms to <i>build</i> disruptive potential</p> <p><i>Strong</i> regulations on transnational financial capital to <i>stop</i> the capture of societal assets by economic elites and the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few</p> <p>Modern monetary policy and <i>end to</i> imperial arrangements of unequal exchange</p> <p><i>Subvert</i> money and fossil fuels</p> <p><i>Abolition</i> of elections and <i>replacement</i> with sortition</p> <p><i>Execution</i> of democratic participation</p>

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<p>Interstitial</p>	<p><i>Get out of a world that is heading towards disaster and rebuild another world, other worlds</i>  <i>Pull the emergency break</i>  <i>Give up on Capitalism</i>  <i>Exit both Capitalism and dependence of the State</i>  <i>Exist at the margins of the economic system</i></p>	<p>An opposition <i>block</i> within the richer economies  Cancer analogies with Capitalism and Growthism  The means need to be <i>consistent</i> or should try to be as consistent as possible with the ends  <i>Focus</i> less on policy reforms and changes within the system, but create <i>prefigurative</i> structures <i>outside</i> it  <i>Prefigure</i> in pre-political spaces  <i>Prefiguring</i> local experiences with a 2 levelled feedback prefiguration: imagination level and practical level  <i>Prefigurative</i> politics - be the change you want to see in the world  <i>Walk away from the overheated engine</i> of the economy: <i>you walk far if you walk with a good pace</i>  <i>Walk the talk</i>  <i>Think out of the box</i>  <i>Try alternatives</i> and <i>adjust what works</i> rather than not trying at all  Crazy democratic <i>experimentation</i> and innovation  Create and use solutions <i>from below</i> wherever there is <i>room for action</i>  Frugal-living people <i>stepping into</i> civil disobedience  Social movement organizing to create autonomy, <i>taking power away</i> from markets and States  <i>Support</i> post-capitalists experiences  <i>Nurture</i> alternatives and let them <i>unfold</i>  Titanic shipwreck analogy with the collapse of Capitalism</p>	<p>Radical <i>redistribution</i> of power, political power <i>towards the many</i>  <i>Go beyond</i> representative democracy via citizens' assemblies  <i>Go beyond</i> money with non-monetary economies and relations  Live and behave in <i>prefigurative</i> ways</p>
<p>Intermingling</p>	<p><i>Look for ways</i> in which our futures could be <i>joined</i> together  Wrong assumption that we should act as if we were one <i>organism</i>  <i>Replace</i> the idea of (false) independency with <i>interdependency</i>  <i>Create bridges</i> between alternatives  <i>Hold hands</i> across alternatives  <i>Planting the seeds</i> of revolution, and <i>point to</i> and <i>take care</i> of those planted generations before us</p>	<p>A collective future needs to be imagined in a participatory way: the future is diverse, <i>queer</i>, there isn't one way <i>forward</i> but multiple ones  Imagine different <i>varieties</i> of degrowth  Understand movements as <i>something organic</i> which <i>grows</i> and becomes more beautiful and complex with time passing, yet also <i>holding the marks</i> of all their histories inside (like the <i>rings of a tree</i>)  <i>Explore</i> alternative <i>paths</i>. There is not one <i>path</i> or model that is universally applicable and will solve all the problems  Degrowth needs to be <i>place sensible</i>, to <i>relate and speak</i> to institutions, people, ideas, that exist in particular locations  Bring degrowth in <i>conversation</i> with indigenous concepts  <i>Relate</i> to alterglobalism, post-development, anti-development or decolonialism, and feminism  <i>Combine</i> the local and global perspective  <i>Build alliances</i> with other heterodox and anti-capitalist movements (e.g., feminists, environmentalists, anti-advertising, anti-fascists, etc), but not <i>waste time</i> on building alliances with powerful orthodox players who do not <i>share</i> a common ontology or epistemology  <i>Connect</i> with <i>struggles along the lines</i> of race and gender in different parts of the Earth  A degrowth future of any impact must <i>grow out</i> of the existing academic studies and create large and powerful movements  Engage more people in the possibilities with <i>grassroots</i> outreach, <i>connecting</i>, and educational <i>offerings</i>  <i>Build and link</i> social movements  <i>Unite</i> struggles, projects, and initiatives  <i>Build</i> collective power and becoming a diverse majority movement  Analogies with indigenous prophecies about the White Man and the destruction and renewal of the Earth, wendigo legends  Analogies with Hybris/Nemesis myths in the</p>	<p>Create new futures that <i>overcome</i> a lot of the problems that all these different movements identify  Co-create public and/or common infrastructures for a good life for all within <i>planetary boundaries</i>  Emancipation <i>built</i> within the <i>interdependence</i> between human communities and with more-than-humans  A <i>strong net</i> that can provide re-organization  Inclusivity and indigenous people <i>having seats at the table</i> in terms of politics, ecology, and economics  <i>Room</i> for development effect of a degrowth transformation in the Global North that would free up <i>ecological space below planetary boundaries</i> in a <i>contract and converge scenario</i></p>

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 classic Greece, Ericson and other classical myths,  
 the "golden Age" myth
 

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## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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