

Marga Reimer, University of Arizona, reimer@email.arizona.edu
Elisabeth Camp, Harvard Society of Fellows, ecamp@fas.harvard.edu
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METAPHOR¹

1. What is Metaphor?: A Tentative Characterization

Metaphor has traditionally been construed as a linguistic phenomenon: as something produced and understood by speakers of natural language. So understood, metaphors are naturally viewed as linguistic expressions of a particular type, or as linguistic expressions used in a particular type of way. We adopt this linguistic conception of metaphor in what follows. In doing so, we do not intend to rule out the possibility of non-linguistic forms of metaphor. Many theorists think that non-linguistic objects (such as paintings or dance performances) or conceptual structures (like *love as a journey* or *argument as war*²) should also be treated as metaphors. Indeed, the idea that metaphors are in the first instance conceptual phenomena, and linguistic devices only derivatively, is the dominant view in what is now the dominant area of metaphor research: cognitive science.³ In construing metaphor as linguistic, we merely intend to impose appropriate constraints on a discussion whose focus is the understanding and analysis of metaphor within contemporary philosophy of language.

Given this starting point, what can be said about metaphor that is not controversial? Very little, as it turns out. Metaphor is a trope or figure of speech, where a ‘figure of speech’ is a *non-literal* use of language. This class also includes irony, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, and meiosis.⁴ What distinguishes metaphor from these other tropes? One standard definition of

¹We would like to thank Richard Moran, William Lycan, Emma Borg, Ram Neta, and Mike Harnish for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

²For an extended discussion of these and other ‘conceptual metaphors,’ see Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and Lakoff (1993).

³See the *Center for the Cognitive Science of Metaphor Online* (<http://philosophy.uoregon.edu/metaphor/metaphor.htm>)

⁴In irony, the intended meaning is in some sense the ‘contrary’ of the words uttered, as when one says of a job that has clearly been poorly done, ‘Good job!’ In metonymy, a single characteristic or entity is used to identify a more complex, related entity, as when ‘The White House’ is used to refer to the President. Synecdoche is a kind of metonymy in which part of something is used to represent the whole, as in ‘All hands on deck.’ Hyperbole involves exaggeration, meiosis understatement. When I say ‘These Tucson summers are killing me,’ I am engaging in hyperbole; when I say of a wild party that things ‘got just a bit out of hand,’ I am engaging in meiosis.

metaphor is as a *figure of speech in which one thing is represented (or spoken of) as something else*. This construal of metaphor comports well with many examples of metaphor drawn from classic literary works. Consider, for instance, “Juliet is the sun” (Shakespeare), “Time is the devourer of all things” (Ovid), or “Poverty is the sister of beggary” (Aristophanes). In the first, a girl, Juliet, is spoken of as the sun; in the second, time is spoken of as a ferocious beast; in the third, poverty is spoken of as sister (and thus as a person).

Some philosophers, in an effort to explain metaphor’s characteristic rhetorical force, have elaborated on this standard construal in terms of “representing-as.” Thus, Monroe Beardsley (1967) identifies two features working in tandem within a metaphor. On the one hand, a metaphor produces a *conceptual tension* between the concept that is expressed by the metaphorical term and the concept(s) that we normally and intuitively apply to the subject. So, for example, there is a ‘tension’ or mismatch between representing Juliet as the sun and as being a girl, or between representing poverty as a sibling and as an economic state. Often (though, as we will see, not always) this ‘tension’ renders the metaphorical sentence logically absurd if construed literally. For this reason, Nelson Goodman (1968) characterizes the conceptual tension to which Beardsley refers as involving a kind of “calculated category mistake.” A metaphor, he says, “projects” a set of “labels” belonging to one realm of objects (e.g., celestial bodies) upon another realm to which those labels do not ordinarily apply (e.g., human beings).

On the other hand, Beardsley points out, in spite of their absurdity metaphors are generally quite *intelligible* and even profound. So, for example, Romeo’s metaphor seems to serve as an effective means for communicating his feelings about Juliet (such as being dazzled by her), to evoke similar attitudes in others, and to claim that she possesses certain properties (such as being beautiful and attractive). Beardsley claims that metaphors are able to do this because the sentence’s inherent conceptual tension imposes a “metaphorical twist” on the relevant term, forcing it to refer to features with which it is normally merely associated.⁵

⁵ See Beardsley (1962).

These characterizations of metaphor do have a certain intuitive appeal, but they themselves employ metaphorical language (“conceptual tension,” “label,” “projection”) in crucial explanatory roles, and so fail to provide fully explicit and satisfactory theories of metaphor. As we will see in what follows, this is quite typical. But it may also be unavoidable: as will also become clear, metaphor is itself a vague and elusive phenomenon.

2. Metaphor and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

Armed with this intuitive idea of what metaphor involves, let’s consider metaphor’s place within analytic philosophy, broadly construed. We will then focus on how it has been treated specifically by contemporary philosophers of language.

Although the last 30 years have seen an explosion of interest in metaphor within analytic philosophy, the topic had previously been eschewed by analytic philosophers. Indeed, until Max Black’s seminal (1962) paper “Metaphor,” it was virtually ignored. This was due largely to the dominance of logical positivism during the preceding decades. Logical positivists viewed metaphor as without cognitive significance, because they assumed that metaphors lacked the crucial criterion for meaningfulness: *verification conditions*. Thus, consider T.S. Eliot’s line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917): “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” It seems that nothing could possibly count as observational evidence for (or against) this claim, because life, as an abstract entity, cannot in principle be measured in physical quantities. We therefore have no idea what sort of situation, if observed, would demonstrate that the sentence was true. From the fact that metaphors apparently fail to specify verification conditions, logical positivists concluded that metaphorical speech lacks cognitive content altogether; instead, it must merely serve to arouse feelings and images in its hearers.

Metaphor was thus mentioned by mid-century analytic philosophers only in order to be set aside as irrelevant because unimportant to truth and knowledge. However, with the publication of Black’s paper advocating an “interaction” theory of metaphor’s irreducible “cognitive content,” analytic philosophers began to turn their attention to metaphor in earnest. In

the '70's and '80's thousands of scholarly papers on metaphor were published, along with many anthologies devoted to metaphor. Several of the latter contained contributions not just by philosophers of language, but also by literary theorists, philosophers of science, linguists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists.⁶ The interest in metaphor among contemporary analytic philosophers, and philosophers of language in particular, remains strong today. This is no doubt due to a continued interest in natural, as opposed to formal or artificial, languages.

Philosophers of language have traditionally been interested in issues like the nature of meaning and truth. And so, when they have turned their attention to metaphor, they have naturally focused on these same issues. Before we turn to these particular topics, though, we should note that virtually every area of analytic philosophy, broadly construed, has paid at least some serious (if relatively limited) attention to metaphor.

Thus, within aesthetics, theorists have wanted to understand the special sort of 'aptness' and beauty that certain metaphors exhibit: the way in which a good metaphor can be, as Wallace Stevens writes, "the cry of its occasion."⁷ In philosophy of religion, there is interest in the appropriate principles for interpreting religious texts, such as the Bible, metaphorically.⁸ Some theologians and philosophers of religion believe that the nature of religious truth is such that it can only be conveyed metaphorically.⁹ Epistemologists have considered the nature and utility of analogical reasoning, which many cognitive psychologists believe to be crucially involved in the interpretation of metaphor.¹⁰ Metaphysicians have been interested in the possibly metaphorical status of crucial but theoretically troublesome terms, such as "existence" and "possible worlds."¹¹ Similarly, in philosophy of mathematics, there is talk of the metaphorical status of mathematical concepts and truths.¹² Finally, within philosophy of science, questions about the epistemic status

⁶ See, for instance, Sacks (1978), Ortony (1979), and Johnson (1981).

⁷ See Hills (1997); Hills cites the phrase from Stevens' poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." See also Isenberg (1973).

⁸ See Tracy (1979).

⁹ See Soskice (1987), McFague (1982).

¹⁰ See Gentner (1989) and Holyoak and Thagard (1995).

¹¹ See Yablo (1996, 1998) and Walton (2000).

¹² See Yablo (2000, 2002) and Lakoff and Nunez (1997).

of scientific models have been linked to the status of metaphors, which seem to bear important structural similarities to models.¹³

3. Four Central Questions

Let us now turn our attention to the understanding and treatment of metaphor within contemporary philosophy of language. Of the many questions concerning metaphor that have been addressed within this particular area of philosophy, four stand out as especially central. These are: (i) what are metaphors? (ii) what is metaphorical meaning? (iii) how do metaphors work? and (iv) what is the nature of metaphorical truth? While these questions can be formulated independently, they are logically connected insofar as the response given to any one constrains possible responses to at least some of the others.

In addressing these questions, many philosophers have followed Black's (1962) methodological lead by first isolating a few uncontroversial cases of metaphor.¹⁴ These examples in effect provide an extensional definition of "metaphor," from which an explicit definition can hopefully be derived. The benefit of this approach is that it gives us an intuitive, if vague, sense for how metaphor differs both from literal language and from other figures of speech. The drawback is that not all theorists begin with the same sorts of examples. Some focus on relatively familiar, conversational metaphors like "You are the cream in my coffee," or "I destroyed my opponent's argument," while others attend to more novel, poetic metaphors such as "A geometrical proof is a mousetrap," or "Christ was a chronometer." Employing such different examples as paradigm cases raises the risk that the different parties will simply talk past one another. The alternative, which is to provide a theoretical definition at the outset, is equally problematic, simply because there are so few uncontroversial assumptions about metaphor.

We now spell out our four central questions in a bit more detail. In the next section, we'll see how various theories of metaphor have attempted to answer them.

¹³ See Hesse (1966, 1993), Kuhn (1979), and Boyd (1979).

¹⁴This group includes both Davidson (1978) and Searle (1979).

(i) *What are metaphors?* Specifically, how does metaphorical language differ from literal language and from other figures of speech? Philosophers have traditionally assumed that there is an important in-principle difference between literal and figurative language, that figurative language is essentially “marked” or distinctive, and that the figurative is in some sense a “deviant” exploitation of the literal. These assumptions have recently come under scrutiny. Thus, for instance, Sadock (1979), Rumelhart (1979), and Recanati (2001) have all questioned whether there is a genuine difference in kind between literal and metaphorical language. Others, such as Goodman (1968), Searle (1979), Sperber and Wilson (1986), and Nunberg (2002), have rejected or at least downplayed the classical distinctions among different forms of figurative language. Instead, they treat metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche (and sometimes other forms of figurative and non-literal language) as a single unified phenomenon.

(ii) *What is the nature of metaphorical meaning?* Answers to this question are importantly tied to assumptions about what counts as “meaning” more generally. Thus, some philosophers, like Grice (1975) and Searle (1979), argue that metaphors are like other forms of indirect speech in expressing a distinctive *speaker* meaning which could in principle be stated literally. Others, such as Black (1962) and Kittay (1987), argue that metaphors have a special, irreducible sort of cognitive “meaning” or “significance,” but that this cannot be expressed in literal language because it does not take the usual propositional form. Still others, such as Davidson (1978) and Rorty (1987), agree that metaphors’ effects cannot be captured in propositional form, but they conclude from this that metaphors have no meaning at all, on the grounds that the only genuine candidates for “meaning” are truth-conditional, propositional contents.

(iii) *How do metaphors work?* That is, how do metaphors manage to mean what they do? This is perhaps the central ‘problem’ of metaphor, for the ease with which we are often able to interpret metaphors, even subtle and complex ones, is rather puzzling on its face. In the case of literal utterances, the interpretative process is presumably compositional. Oversimplifying a bit, the hearer computes the utterance meaning on the basis of his or her grasp of individual word

meanings (where this includes fixing the values of any contextually-sensitive terms) and syntax. Presumably something more is needed in the interpretation of metaphor, or else metaphorical meaning would just *be* literal meaning. What ‘more’ could this be?

Some have thought that words themselves have special metaphorical meanings which combine compositionally in the usual fashion, or that metaphorical meaning results from some alteration in the process of composition itself.¹⁵ Others have assumed that metaphorical meaning is computed by pragmatic means, employing global conversational principles, *after* the process of literal composition is completed.¹⁶ Still others argue that metaphorical interpretation and meaning have little to do with composition at all. They maintain instead that metaphors require their hearers to engage in some special sort of cognitive process, such as cultivating an “interplay” between two cognitive systems,¹⁷ or that they simply arouse, by merely causal mechanisms, certain sorts of cognitive and affective effects in their hearers.¹⁸

(iv) *What is the nature of metaphorical truth?* Are metaphors associated with a distinctive brand of truth? Here, the logical connection with the earlier questions is perhaps most obvious. If the meaning of a metaphor is simply the proposition(s) the speaker intends to communicate, and if these propositions can be given literal expression, then presumably literal and metaphorical truth are identical in kind. If, on the other hand, metaphors are not in the business of communicating propositions at all, but rather serve to evoke certain distinctive responses to certain sorts of situations, then the relevant brand of truth, if any, must be quite different: perhaps something more akin to “revealingness” or “compartment.”¹⁹ Finally, it might be the case that metaphors do serve to communicate contents which can be true or false in the usual sense, but that for one reason or another these contents are not capable of literal expression.

¹⁵See Beardsley (1962), Levin (1977), Cohen and Margalit (1972), and more recently, Stern (2000).

¹⁶ See Grice (1975) and Searle (1979).

¹⁷See Black (1962) and Kittay (1987).

¹⁸ See Davidson (1978) and Rorty (1987).

¹⁹ See Cooper (1993).

4. Four Influential Theories

Many theories of metaphor have been proposed and defended by philosophers of language since the publication of Black's "interaction" theory. Most attempt to answer questions (i) through (iv), even if only indirectly. In this section, we survey four of the more influential theories; this survey is intended to be representative rather than exhaustive.

(i) Simile Theories

Simile theories are the oldest and, until fairly recently, the most widely held theories of metaphor.²⁰ Aristotle seems to have been the first to suggest²¹ that metaphors are 'compressed' or 'abbreviated' similes. On any such theory, the meaning of a metaphor is identified with that of the corresponding simile: where "*A is B*" is the metaphor (e.g., "Love is a journey"), its meaning is given by the sentence "*A is like B*" (e.g., "Love is like a journey"). On such a view, the interpretation of a metaphor is a matter of interpreting the corresponding simile, and the truth of the metaphor is reduced to that of the simile.

The simile theory has both intuitive and methodological motivations. First, it often seems as though some sort of comparison is made, or at least adumbrated, in metaphor. Consider Hermann Melville's (1856) "I had somehow slept off the fumes of vanity." Although no comparison is made explicitly here, it is nonetheless clear that Melville is drawing our attention to similarities between the toxicity of fumes and the personality flaw of vanity. Second, the simile theory appears to account for our conflicting intuitions about metaphors' truth values. "Juliet is the sun" is false if interpreted literally: Juliet is clearly not a gaseous ball of fire ninety-three million miles from earth. But the simile that gives the sentence's metaphorical meaning — "Juliet is *like* the sun" — is arguably true.

²⁰We should also mention the so-called 'substitution theory' of metaphor, according to which a metaphor is merely a substitute for some other expression which, used literally, would have expressed the same 'cognitive content.' This once-popular theory is no longer widely held, if it is held at all. For some criticisms, see Black (1962).

²¹We use 'suggested' here advisedly, as not all theorists agree that Aristotle actually endorsed this theory. See Johnson (1981).

The most obvious methodological motivation for the theory lies in the reductive nature of its central claim, that metaphor is a form of simile. At a minimum, the theory reduces two problems to one: we now need only to explain how similes themselves work. Further, if the meanings of similes are unproblematic because literal, then the ‘problem’ of metaphor has been resolved altogether: we have analyzed metaphorical meaning and truth in terms of literal meaning and truth.

Despite these virtues, the simile theory has been criticized on a number of counts.²² First, not all metaphors are so readily translatable into simile form, if at all. William Lycan (1999) makes the point nicely with the Shakespearean metaphor “When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/ Lends the tongue vows.”²³ Concerning the simile that this metaphor is alleged to abbreviate, Lycan (1999, p. 217) writes:

A first pass might be: When *x*, which is like a person’s blood, does something that resembles burning, how prodigally *y*, which is like a person’s soul, does something similar to lending some things that are vowel-like to *z*, which resembles a person’s tongue. He then remarks dryly, “We are not much wiser.”

Second, the simile analysis appears to represent metaphor as superficial and uninformative. For many philosophers²⁴ have claimed that similes themselves are trivial, on the grounds that everything is like everything else in *some* respect or other. Yet metaphors often appear to be informative and even profound. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the similarities that we most naturally cite in explaining what a metaphor’s corresponding simile means are often themselves figurative. Consider the opening lines of Sylvia Plath’s (1961) poem “Mirror”: “I am silver and exact/I have no preconceptions.” Presumably the protagonist is here describing herself metaphorically as a mirror; on the simile theory she thus means that she is like a mirror. One natural elaboration of what this simile means is that she *reflects* the world around

²²See Black (1962), Beardsley (1967), Davidson (1978), Searle (1979), and Tirrell (1991).

²³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.iii.116-7.

²⁴See Goodman (1968), Davidson (1978), and Searle (1979).

her, but the key word “reflects” here is itself obviously metaphorical. We seem to have fallen into a vicious explanatory circle.

In response to the second and third of these worries, Robert Fogelin (1988) has proposed a figurative version of the simile theory. According to Fogelin, statements of similarity should be understood in terms of the notion of “salience”: the respect(s) in which *A* is said to be like *B* depend on which of *B*’s features are salient in that context of utterance.²⁵ What is distinctive about *figurative* similes, and the metaphors that abbreviate them, is how those salient features are determined. Consider the metaphor “Churchill was a bulldog.” According to Fogelin, in using this metaphor we compare Churchill to a bulldog, but in order to understand this comparison we must “trim the feature space” of bulldogs in terms of Churchill’s salient features.²⁶ More specifically: the hearer rules out a literal interpretation of the implicit simile on the grounds that Churchill shares none of the usual, obviously salient features of bulldogs. The hearer nonetheless charitably assumes that the alleged similarity does obtain, and so he ignores the salient features of bulldogs that render the literal comparison false, such as having floppy ears and being small enough to fit down burrows. He searches instead for features of bulldogs that match up with the salient features of Churchill. Presumably, these include ‘character traits’ like resoluteness and stubbornness; they might also include physical traits like having a thick neck and jowly face. The metaphor “Churchill was a bulldog” claims that Churchill is like a bulldog in these respects.

Fogelin’s theory nicely defuses one of the main objections against the literal simile theory: that it could not explain the informativeness and profundity of metaphor. While “Juliet is like the sun” is literally false, according to Fogelin, it is true and even profound when interpreted figuratively, because it raises to salience certain features that Juliet does share with the sun, and that we might not otherwise notice. It also goes some way toward addressing the third worry, by giving an analysis of figurative similes. However, it is doubtful that all figurative similes can in fact be adequately analyzed in terms of features which the two objects in question are believed to

²⁵ In this Fogelin follows Tversky (1977).

²⁶ Fogelin (1988), p. 91.

actually share, as Fogelin assumes.²⁷ So, for instance, “Sally is a block of ice” is intuitively true just in case Sally is like ice in being cold. But there’s no obvious single property, of coldness, which applies to both frozen water and personal temperaments in the same way, and it’s not clear how to analyze the simile further into features that are in fact shared. Similarly, the sense in which Juliet is like the sun intuitively depends in part on a higher-order analogy between the properties of being bright and being beautiful, rather than upon a concrete feature possessed by both Juliet and the sun.²⁸ Finally, Fogelin’s view is clearly still vulnerable to the first objection above, that not all metaphors can be translated into simile form.

(ii) Interaction Theories

As we mentioned, one of the earliest modern alternatives to the simile theory was the ‘interaction’ view of metaphor. This view was first advocated by the literary theorist I.A. Richards (1936), and was subsequently developed by the philosopher Max Black (1962). Such theories have two central claims: (i) that metaphors have an *irreducible* “cognitive content,” and (ii) that this cognitive content (or “meaning”) is produced by the “interaction” of different cognitive systems. Interactionists generally claim that the “cognitive contents” of metaphors can be true, even though they are not amenable to literal expression.

According to Black, in a metaphor of the form “*A* is *B*,” the “system of associated commonplaces” for *B* “interacts” with that of *A* to generate a metaphorical meaning for the whole sentence, by “filtering” our thoughts about the ‘system’ associated with *A*. Consider one of Black’s examples: “Man is a wolf.” The properties of being a predator, traveling in packs, and being fierce and ruthless are all commonplaces associated with “wolf.” These properties are therefore instrumental to comprehending the metaphor: they serve as the “filter” for thinking about mankind, by emphasizing just those commonplaces of “man” that fit with them. The

²⁷ See Ortony (1979), Searle (1979).

²⁸ In this case, we can construct a higher-order property which Juliet and the sun do share: the property of possessing a property which bears a certain relation *R* to other properties. But then we seem to be back in the situation of postulating uninformative analyses of the sort criticized by Lycan above.

metaphor's "cognitive content" or meaning is the distinctive way of thinking about mankind that this filtering produces. Notice here that "commonplaces" need not be true. For instance, the commonplace that wolves are ruthless is still part of the relevant system, even though wolves, as amoral creatures, cannot actually be ruthless. Likewise, the other commonplaces mentioned above would remain relevant even if it turned out that in fact wolves are docile herbivores who tend to travel in pairs. What matters is not the actual properties of the objects denoted, or even the properties that speakers and hearers *believe* those objects to possess, but rather what the denoting expressions "call to mind."²⁹

The interaction theory's central motivation is to account for the apparent fact that metaphors function as powerful cognitive tools: as devices that enable us to better understand the world in which we live. It thus coheres nicely with the view, advocated by Thomas Kuhn (1979) and Richard Boyd (1979) among others, that scientific models appear to increase scientists' understanding of the universe. The interaction theory also comports well with the view, popular among certain cognitive scientists, that ordinary thought and reason are largely, and irreducibly, metaphorical.³⁰ For the interactionist regards as misguided any attempt to *reduce* metaphorical meaning to literal meaning.

Perhaps not surprisingly, though, the interaction theory as presented by Black has seemed too vague to be of great theoretical value. Part of the problem is, once again, that Black analyzes metaphor itself in terms of other metaphors like "association," "interaction," and "filtering." Nevertheless, some theorists have managed to develop Black's central claim — that metaphor is irreducibly a matter of interacting cognitive systems — in more theoretically tractable terms.³¹

Rather different criticisms have been launched by Donald Davidson (1978) and Fogelin (1988).³² Davidson claims that there is no clear theoretical value to positing special metaphorical

²⁹ "Commonplaces" can still call features to mind even if they are not believed to be true of the objects denoted by the relevant term. For instance, even if both the speaker and hearer know that gorillas are in fact gentle creatures, the stereotype that gorillas are nasty and violent can play a role in determining the "cognitive content" of the metaphorical utterance.

³⁰ See Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and Lakoff (1993).

³¹ See e.g., Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Kittay (1987).

³² For Black's reply to Davidson, see his (1978).

‘meanings’ or ‘cognitive contents’.³³ As he puts it, to say that metaphorical meaning explains how metaphor works is “like explaining why a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power”³⁴: we have simply found a new, fancier way to describe the phenomenon under investigation, but we have made no real explanatory progress. A second objection of Davidson’s concerns Black’s claim that metaphors are not amenable to precise literal paraphrase. If so, asks Davidson, why should we suppose that there is any meaning there to begin with? If metaphors have a “cognitive content” beyond the literal, then why should it be so difficult, even impossible, to capture that content in literal language? Finally, Fogelin points out that not all cases of metaphor are so easily explained in terms of conceptual “interaction.” Consider John Keats’s (1819) metaphor: “O for a beaker fill of the warm south.” One would be hard pressed to specify the “cognitive systems” whose “interaction” makes this such an effective use of language. More generally, Black’s view works best for metaphors that consist of a general kind term predicated of an individual or kind, but not all metaphors take this form.³⁵

Philosophers suspicious of the special, irreducible “cognitive contents” posited by interactionists have developed several alternatives, the best known of which are Gricean and noncognitivist theories. Let us consider these in turn.

(iii) Gricean Theories

Gricean theories of metaphor are in the first instance theories of metaphorical *interpretation*. Their central claim is that to understand a metaphor is to understand what a speaker intends to communicate by means of it, where communication is analyzed in Gricean terms. Roughly, successful communication consists in the hearer’s recognizing the speaker’s intention to get the hearer to recognize what she is trying to communicate to him. Insofar as a metaphor can be said to have a meaning, this is identified with what the speaker intends to

³³See Kittay (1987) for a response to Davidson’s contention here.

³⁴Davidson (1978), p. 31.

³⁵See White (1996).

communicate; the sentence uttered itself has only its literal meaning. A metaphor's truth-value is reduced to that of what the speaker intends to communicate.

Since John Searle is the best-known advocate of a broadly Gricean theory of metaphor,³⁶ we will consider his view. According to Searle (1979, pp. 76-8):

The problem of explaining how metaphors work is a special case of the general problem of explaining how speaker meaning and sentence or word meaning come apart... Our task in constructing a theory of metaphor is to try to state the principles which relate literal sentence meaning to metaphorical [speaker's] utterance meaning.

Searle divides the interpretative process into three stages. First, the hearer must decide whether to look for a nonliteral interpretation. Such a search is typically undertaken when a literal interpretation of the utterance would yield a defective (false, trivial, or irrelevant) utterance. Second, once the hearer decides to seek a specifically metaphorical interpretation, she employs a set of principles for generating possible speaker meanings. Searle offers eight principles according to which the uttered phrase can "call to mind" a different meaning "in ways that are specific to metaphor."³⁷ So, for instance, the intended meaning might specify a defining feature or a well-known characteristic associated with the uttered phrase. Third, the hearer must identify which among this range of possible meanings is most likely to be the speaker's intended meaning. Thus, the fact that islands are great places to vacation is not likely to be relevant to the interpretation of Donne's metaphor "No man is an island," while the fact that islands are separated from other land masses *is* likely to be relevant, especially in the context of a speech about social relations.

The motivation for a Gricean account is three-fold. First, it captures the intuition that metaphors are meaningful, that they have a "cognitive content" other than their literal content. Second, it does this without violating what Grice (1975) called "Modified Occam's Razor." This methodological principle is simply Occam's Razor applied to linguistic meanings: *Don't multiply*

³⁶See Grice (1975) for a brief sketch of such a view; see also Martinich (1984).

³⁷ Searle (1979), p. 85.

senses beyond necessity. The Gricean account respects this principle because it explains metaphors' meanings by appealing only to literal sentence meaning plus general interpretive principles. And third, a Gricean theory embeds the explanation of metaphor within a well-developed, independently motivated theory of linguistic communication that accommodates a variety of cases where sentence meaning and speaker meaning appear to come apart.

Criticisms of Gricean theories of metaphor are varied. First, on most Gricean accounts, the hearer must first identify the utterance as somehow "defective" if interpreted literally. Only then is the search for an alternative, non-literal interpretation triggered.³⁸ However, not all utterances used metaphorically are obviously defective.³⁹ A sentence like "No man is an island" exhibits no grammatical deviance: it is literally true, albeit trivially so. Utterances of sentences like "The rock is becoming brittle with age" or "Anchorage is a cold city" could plausibly count as both true *and* informative when construed either literally or metaphorically, depending on the context. And a "twice true" metaphor like "Jesus was a carpenter" could count as both literally and metaphorically true *and* informative within a single context of utterance. It seems that a speaker could even plausibly intend to communicate both contents simultaneously. So there need be no deviance either in the sentence itself or in the utterance of it.

Second, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the literal meaning of a sentence used metaphorically needn't actually be processed in order for the metaphor to be understood.⁴⁰ If this is correct, then it seems that a Gricean theory could at most serve as a rational reconstruction, rather than a factual description, of the interpretive process.⁴¹ Third, on a Gricean theory, the speaker's communicative intentions exhaust the metaphor's meaning. Yet a metaphor's import often seems to go beyond what the speaker explicitly anticipated, especially for novel, poetic metaphors.⁴² Finally, Griceans generally assume that metaphorical meaning, like speaker

³⁸ Searle allows that a metaphorical interpretation may be triggered without any defectiveness, for instance when we are on the lookout for them while reading a Romantic poem (p. 105).

³⁹ See Reddy (1969), Cohen (1975), and Tirrell (1991).

⁴⁰ See Rumelhart (1979) and Gibbs (1994).

⁴¹ This seems to be how Searle, at least, intends his view to be understood.

⁴² Though the speaker's explicit expectations may not exhaust, or even track, the content of her actual intentions. See, e.g., Cavell (1976).

meaning more generally, is fully propositional in form and fully capable of literal expression. The Gricean theory thus seems doomed to leave out what is most interesting about metaphor: its complex cognitive and affective “import,” which seems to be inherently inexpressible in literal terms.⁴³

(iv) Noncognitivist Theories

In light of the difficulties we’ve encountered so far, some contemporary philosophers of language have questioned the widely-held view that metaphors are, in any substantive sense, meaningful. These philosophers — “noncognitivists” — do not question metaphor’s *effectiveness*, only the means by which its effects are achieved. **The central claim of such theorists is that a sentence used metaphorically has no cognitive content aside from its literal content.** Noncognitivists thus resemble Griceans in denying that the words uttered themselves have any special meaning. They depart from Griceans, though, in also denying that there is any determinate propositional thought which the speaker intends to communicate by means of those words. These negative claims are often coupled with positive views about how metaphor does “work its wonders” after all. Thus, Davidson (1978) offers what might be termed a **“causal theory”** of metaphor.⁴⁴ On his view, “a metaphor makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things,” by **making us “see one thing as another.”**⁴⁵

Despite its undeniable counter-intuitiveness, noncognitivism is not without motivation. First, it accounts for the facts that **many metaphors don’t easily admit of literal paraphrase**, and that their ‘import’ seems to be different in kind from that of typical literal utterances. Second, it is remarkably **economical**: it purports to explain how metaphor works without appealing to special word meanings or even to Gricean speaker meanings. According to Davidson, a metaphor is like a bump on the head, or a drug: one can employ it to cause certain effects in one’s audience,

⁴³ Though see Camp (2003) for defense of a broadly Gricean theory on which at least some metaphorical utterances can be intended to communicate complex structured representations which are not fully propositional and which may not be fully explicitly appreciated by the speaker.

⁴⁴ See Rorty (1987) for further discussion of the merely causal status of metaphor on this view.

⁴⁵ Davidson (1978), pp. 31, 45.

including noticing surprising similarities between objects, but this should not lead us to suppose that the metaphor, the bump or the drug itself *means* those effects, or even that the agent meant that effect *by* her action. Third, Davidson argues, **the analogy with similes actually supports noncognitivism. We are much less tempted to suppose that similes have a special meaning beyond their literal meaning:** “Juliet is like the sun” means that Juliet is like the sun, nothing more, nothing less.⁴⁶ Of course, the *point* of uttering the simile would not be merely to express that proposition, but rather to draw the hearer’s attention to similarities between Juliet and the sun. But we needn’t then suppose that the speaker means to claim *that* those similarities are there to be noticed.

The noncognitivist theory has been criticized on a variety of grounds.⁴⁷ Most obviously, the theory seems to conflict with fact that metaphors are cognitively significant: that **they can be understood or misunderstood**, that they figure in our reasoning and thought, and that they can be true or false. Moreover, as Merrie Bergmann (1982) and others have pointed out, a noncognitivist view misses the role that metaphors play in **assertion and counter-assertion**. If I call Bill a vulture, and you deny this, then it seems clear that *something* has been asserted and denied, and that this ‘something’ is not the claim that Bill is a certain kind of bird.⁴⁸

Finally, as several philosophers⁴⁹ have pointed out, **the noncognitivist view appears to be incompatible with the phenomenon of dead metaphors**. Dead metaphors are expressions which have lost their metaphorical import through frequent use, and so no longer invite creative interpretation. Their former metaphorical import has ‘hardened’ into a new literal meaning. Thus, the expression “burned up,” as in “He was all burned up about his impending divorce,” is a dead metaphor, whose second literal meaning is just *extremely angry*. As Davidson puts it, the expression no longer conjures up “fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears.”⁵⁰ The difficulty this poses for the noncognitivist is that it seems as if dead metaphors could only acquire

⁴⁶Here, there is explicit disagreement with Fogelin (1988).

⁴⁷ See Moran (1989 and 1996) for these and other objections.

⁴⁸ See Bezuidenhout (2001) for further discussion of this point.

⁴⁹ See Goodman (1978), Moran (1989), and Reimer (1996).

⁵⁰ Davidson (1978), p. 36.

their secondary literal meanings if they were previously used to communicate those very meanings. And this would seem conflict with the basic noncognitivist commitment: that speakers do not mean anything by metaphors.⁵¹

5. Current and Future Trends

The most active domain of metaphor research is currently located in cognitive science.⁵² The focus here is typically on issues such as metaphor's influence on thought and action, and the role of metaphor in cognitive development and linguistic competence.⁵³ There is generally less emphasis on metaphor as a form of expression in natural language. Thus, for instance, George Lakoff and his colleagues are most interested in metaphor as a cognitive tool for extending concepts' initial applications to new realms. They argue that we metaphorically transfer basic physical concepts like *up* and *over* to other realms: to the social, emotional, scientific, and even mathematical domains. These metaphorical mappings render certain ways of speaking and acting natural (e.g., "He's moving *up* in the world," "I'm feeling quite *up* today"). What we would normally classify as metaphorical language should, on this view, be analyzed instead as a direct, explicit representation of metaphorical way of thinking.⁵⁴

The future of metaphor research within the philosophy of language itself is less clear. One hope is that philosophers of language will work with, or at least alongside, researchers in other disciplines, so that their theories can be informed and even shaped by the varied observations garnered from these other disciplines. In particular, many of the theories discussed above invoke the notions of 'salience' and 'similarity' in one way or another, but have little to say about what these involve. Researchers in linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, and neurobiology are developing such notions, in work on metaphor and on other areas.

To see how philosophical theories of metaphor could be informed by other disciplines,

⁵¹ But see Reimer (2001) for a defense of Davidson.

⁵² See Gibbs (1994).

⁵³ See, for instance, Happé (1995) and Langdon, Davies, and Coltheart (2001).

⁵⁴ See Lakoff (1993), Lakoff and Turner (1989).

we need only return to the four questions we discussed above as central concerns for philosophers of language:

- (i) What is metaphor?
- (ii) What is the nature of metaphorical meaning?
- (iii) What is the nature of metaphorical communication?
- (iv) What is the nature of metaphorical truth?

Interest in these questions is by no means confined to philosophy of language. Literary theorists are interested in distinguishing metaphor from other figures, such as simile and irony, and thereby address (i). Cognitive scientists do so as well, by proposing that metaphors be viewed primarily as mental representations and only derivatively as linguistic phenomena. Philosophers and historians of science argue, along with cognitive scientists, that metaphors are significant cognitive tools, and in this way they address (ii). Cognitive psychologists and linguists have done significant empirical research on the processing of metaphor and of language generally, thus shedding light on (iii). Interest in (iv) is perhaps more fully limited to philosophy *per se*, but metaphysicians, philosophers of mathematics, and even some historians of science have been concerned to explore the possibility of a substantive sort of truth which is not literal. It should thus be clear that philosophers of language can learn much about metaphor from the research efforts of those outside of their own area, and perhaps even especially outside of philosophy itself.

At the same time, an increasing focus on various forms of context-sensitivity within philosophy of language and linguistics has led to the development of new explanatory tools and strategies. “Hidden indexicals,”⁵⁵ “unarticulated constituents,”⁵⁶ and “free enrichment”⁵⁷ have all been postulated as mechanisms for bridging the gap between what might seem to be a sentence’s semantically encoded content and the content that is expressed by an utterance of it on a given

⁵⁵ Cf. Stanley (2000)

⁵⁶ Cf. Perry (1986) and Crimmins (1992).

⁵⁷ Cf. Recanati (1995).

occasion. These same mechanisms have recently begun to be deployed in explaining metaphor as well. For instance, Josef Stern has argued that metaphors function like demonstrative terms.⁵⁸ David Hills⁵⁹ and Kendall Walton⁶⁰ have each argued that metaphorical meaning crucially depends upon a sort of “pretense” or “make-believe” about word use, and about the schema of objects invoked. And Anne Bezuidenhout⁶¹ and François Recanati⁶² have advocated treating metaphor as a form of “direct expression” rather than of implicature or indirect speech, as Grice and Searle do. Perhaps this influx of new ideas will lead to a fruitful reconfiguration of the established options, much as occurred around the time of Davidson’s and Searle’s seminal publications in the late 1970’s.

⁵⁸ Stern (2000).

⁵⁹ Hills (1997).

⁶⁰ Walton (1993)

⁶¹ Bezuidenhout (2001).

⁶² Recanati (2001).

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