

On the Alleged Pervasiveness of Metaphor

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There is a widespread opinion that the metaphor pervades natural language. Metaphor is, however, in its Aristotelian definition, a rare phenomenon. How, then, can the shift from rare to pervasive be explained? A possible explanation is that the definition of metaphor has changed. I will provide a sketch of how this shift might have taken place. I argue that the original name for metaphor undergoes a metaphorical shift. The thesis of the pervasiveness of metaphor, then, makes sense only if we explicate how the original name of metaphor (and its mechanism) has been transposed into the whole of language. In the next part of the paper, I will develop some approaches of how this transposition could be done. I will conclude that, after all, a theory decides what counts as a metaphor. If a theory advocates its omnipresence there must be good reasons for doing so. I try to explicate some of these reasons.

There is a widespread opinion that metaphor pervades natural language as noted by Vico, Herder, Bentham, and Nietzsche, or more recently by Richards¹ or Lakoff and Johnson² and many others. I will call this view *the pervasiveness thesis*; it can be formulated as follows:

P: All language is metaphorical.

p: $\forall x \text{ Met}(x)$ ³

Let us start with a personal motivation. Donald Davidson's controversial claim that metaphors have no meaning beyond the literal has an immediate consequence "that most metaphorical sentences are *patently false*". (Davidson 1978, 258) This means that the semantic category of meaning is of no use for metaphors; they should be investigated, if possible, by other theoretical tools. The pervasiveness thesis poses a following challenge for Davidson's claim: If all language were metaphorical and all metaphors were without (any nontrivial) meaning, then all language would be without any meaning. An upshot of it all would be that the notion of meaning is of no use for investigating language at all. To avoid this, we have to reject one of the premises of the argument, which is either the pervasiveness thesis or Davidson's view on the nature of metaphor, or alternatively try to reconcile the both. For someone who (like myself) is convinced that Davidson's claim is correct it amounts to rejecting the pervasiveness thesis as such or trying to formulate the thesis so that we could avoid the absurd consequence.

What is metaphor? Following the pervasiveness thesis, the answer is very short: "Everything." Well, it depends what is understood under the term "metaphor". This in fact Socratic question could be taken as "What is the sense of 'metaphor'?" or as "What counts as a metaphor?". To put it in Fregean terms, is it the question of sense of "metaphor" or the question of reference of "metaphor"? The question of sense is conceptual one (one may say *a priori*), the

¹ For Richards is metaphor an "omnipresent principle of language" (Richards 1936, 92).

² "Metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, ix).

³ I use upper-case letters (e.g. P, P1, M) for theses and sentences, lower-case letters for their logical forms (e.g. p, p').

question of reference is empirical one (or *a posteriori*), so the question of sense is prior to the one of reference. Hence, the question of reference is actually “Given that the meaning of ‘metaphor’ is such and such, what counts, then, as a metaphor?” The meaning of “metaphor” can be fixed either by a theory of metaphor or by everyday use of this expression. These options are not exclusive, for a theory of metaphor can be supposed to *explicate* everyday uses of “metaphor”. Thus, if one considers the everyday concept of metaphor as important, then the question of what is metaphor is, in a respect, an empirical question. What is the everyday use of “metaphor” is a matter of an empirical investigation.⁴

My point is that the pervasiveness thesis is on no account a result of an investigation of the everyday use of the expression “metaphor”, purely and simply because the expressions “metaphor” and “everything”⁵ are not synonymous. For this reason, we can assume that the meaning of “metaphor” is fixed by a linguistic or philosophical theory and investigate how a theory of metaphor gets to its pervasiveness.

First, I shall provide two simple worries about or arguments against the pervasiveness thesis – a *historical* one and a *systematic* one. Then I will proceed to give a precise formulation of the thesis in order to escape the criticism. Finally, I am going to indicate three approaches of how the pervasiveness thesis could be understood and reasonably maintained.

The historical argument

The pervasiveness of metaphor has been the basis for a refusal of the Aristotelian view of metaphor. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines metaphor as “the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion” (Aristotle 1984, 1457b). In Halliwell’s translation: “Metaphor is the application of a word that belongs to another thing” (Aristotle 1998, 1457b). According to this definition, metaphor is a novel (or perhaps poetic) linguistic expression. By definition, it is an alien, rare or marginal linguistic phenomenon. How, then, can the shift from rare to pervasive be explained? A simple explanation could be that the definition of metaphor has changed in the meantime and we are now dealing with another concept. Then there would be two concepts of metaphor; let us say METAPHOR_{classical} and METAPHOR_{modern}.⁶ Although it would hold true that

$$\forall x \text{ Met}_{\text{modern}}(x)$$

⁴ There is a tendency in contemporary linguistics propagating the view that what counts as a metaphor is an empirical question. Consider, e.g., the following quotation from (Lakoff 1993, 202): “The word metaphor was defined as a novel or poetic linguistic expression where one or more words for a concept are used outside of its normal conventional meaning to express a similar concept. But such issues are not matters for definitions; they are *empirical* questions.” (Italics mine) I am strongly opposed to this view.

⁵ To be more precise, the expressions “metaphor” and “each of linguistic phenomena” are not synonymous.

⁶ Something like this is suggested in (Lakoff 1993, 203). As opposed to the classical, the modern definition of metaphor is “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”.

but not that

$\forall x \text{Met}_{\text{classical}}(x)$.

Then questions that are worth investigating arise: What do these two notions of metaphor have in common? What has brought about this change? In what follows I will outline in what respect the definition of metaphor remained unchanged and in what respect it had to change in order to keep *the pervasiveness thesis* (to be explicated later) reasonable. Therefore, the question is, how can the shift from rare to pervasive be explained.

A possible answer can go along these lines: There is a deviant language phenomenon that deserves to be named and investigated. We need a definition in order to restrict the field of inquiry. The investigation issues, ideally, in an explanation of how this deviant phenomenon works. The original definition is nominal (or explicit) in the sense that it determines what counts as a positive case of the phenomenon under question. After the inquiry is made, we can convert the nominal definition into a real (or implicit) one, for we know how the phenomenon works. Let us call it mechanism of the phenomenon. We can change the definition, but we do not need to. If we make this change, we cannot be sure whether this mechanism does not fit other parts of language that were not subsumed under the original nominal definition.

This is, I think, an outline of an explanation of how a rare phenomenon could become pervasive. There is, however, still a problem with this explanation. One could wonder whether the mechanism originally founded or developed for a rare phenomenon was not too general if it fits other phenomena as well or even the whole of language. Ideally, we have to find a mechanism that fits *exactly* the phenomena under question and none other. Let us assume that this could be done. Even in this case one can realize that the mechanism is – in some respect – active in other phenomena. The expression “in some respect” could mean “in a latent form,” “in a grade,” “partly” etc. This is to say that in order to extend the mechanism, we have to generalize it. In other words, its original name undergoes a metaphorical shift. If the original word was “metaphor”, then we can speak of a metaphorical change of the term “metaphor”.⁷

The thesis of the pervasiveness of metaphor, then, makes sense only if we explicate how the original mechanism of metaphor has been transposed into the whole of language. In the next part of the paper, I will develop three approaches to how this transposition could be done.

The argument of excluded opposites

This argument is, as it were, deflationary and addresses the theoretical usefulness of the concept of metaphor (or of the predicate “metaphor”). It reads:

If everything were a metaphor, the notion of metaphor would be empty and thus for theoretical purposes useless.

⁷ It is well known that even the Aristotelian definition of metaphor as such is a metaphor. The expression “metaphor” is etymologically “meta + phora”, which means “carrying over”.

In other words, if everything were a metaphor, there would be no point in using of the concept “metaphor” as a theoretical tool for investigating the language. This is, of course, an instance of the *argument of excluded opposites* and we must carefully think over its impact.⁸ The argument can be roughly stated as follows: If predicate A has no opposite, then A is senseless. For it would be pointless to predicate of a thing that it is A, if there were no things that are not A. It would be pointless to predicate of a thing that it has a color, if there were not things that have not color.

It could be helpful to compare the (logical form of the) pervasiveness thesis with the universally quantified sentence

M: All men are mortal. $\forall x (\text{Man}(x) \rightarrow \text{Mortal}(x))$

The logical form of this sentence is different from the pervasiveness thesis, but this is only because of the choice of the scope of the universal quantifier. In this case, the universal quantifier takes scope over all possible creatures (or all things), some of them are men, some are mortal. So none of the predicates is claimed to be pervasive. The pervasiveness thesis can be turned into this logical form by an appropriate choice of the scope of the universal quantifier too. In form p above, bound variable x ranges over all (possible) linguistic expressions or phenomena. Let x take scope over some superclass, for instance over all character strings. The logical form of P would be then

$p^x: \forall x (\text{Linguistic_expression}(x) \rightarrow \text{Met}(x))$

This would be a proper analysis of P only if predicate Met were applicable over the entire scope of the universal quantifier. But this is not the case. The predicate “be metaphorical” has sense only within the class of linguistic expressions, because the question whether a character string is a metaphor arises only after its recognition as a linguistic expression. In the case of the predicate “be mortal”, there is a possible opposite out of the class of men (a god might be immortal for instance).⁹ There is, however, no opposite of “be metaphorical” out of the class of linguistic expressions. Since there would be no point in employing the predicate “be a linguistic expression” for analyzing P, following Occam’s razor or a related principle of parsimony, the analysis of P as $p (\forall x \text{Met}(x))$ is preferable over p^x .¹⁰

Thus, does the fact that everything is a metaphor (and so has no opposite) really entail that the concept of metaphor is senseless or that it is useless? I see two ways of how to eschew the unfavorable conclusion depending on our attitude to the premise of the argument, which is the pervasiveness thesis. Either we can accept the premise and consider its implications or we can relativize the premise, i.e. the pervasiveness thesis itself.

⁸ See (Passmore 1961) for an overview of the argument.

⁹ One could modify M so that there would be no opposite for “be mortal”. Consider the sentence “All creatures are mortal.” which has the same logical form as the sentence P, i.e. $\forall x \text{Mortal}(x)$. In this case, the argument of excluded opposites would pose the same problem.

¹⁰ Here I am indebted to Radim Bělohrad.

I. The pervasiveness thesis as a ladder

The first line of argument goes as follows: It does not follow from the excluded opposites that the predicate under question is senseless in all contexts, but only that it cannot be used for distinguishing between positive and negative cases. We can, however, use the predicate for other purposes, e.g. to remind of some essential feature of particulars to which the predicate applies. So, it obviously follows from the pervasiveness thesis that we cannot distinguish between literal and metaphorical; we can use the thesis for pointing out that our language is essentially metaphorical and subsequently adjust our general linguistic theory in order to take this important finding into account. The pervasiveness thesis serves here as Wittgensteinian ladder that can be thrown away after we have climbed it.¹¹ Although it proves to be nonsensical, it is, however, useful.

This does not prevent us, by no means, from using the notion “metaphor” in our everyday discourse, even for distinguishing between metaphorical and literal. Analogous to the concepts METAPHOR_{classical} and METAPHOR_{modern}, we have also two notions of metaphor; let us call them “metaphor before the ladder was thrown away” and “metaphor after the ladder was thrown away”. We can actually use the notion of metaphor even for whatever purpose, but it must take place outside the theory that claims the pervasiveness of metaphor.

II. Relativizations of the pervasiveness thesis

The other way of escaping the argument of excluded opposites consists in relativizing the pervasiveness thesis. It may hold that *in one respect*, everything is a metaphor and *in another respect*, there are language phenomena that are not metaphors. This means that the original pervasiveness thesis has to be weakened; for instance, the scope of the universal quantifier can be restricted. To show how this could work we have to specify the pervasiveness thesis and dispute its own plausibility. Our initial formulation of the thesis reads:

P: All language is metaphorical.

This formulation has a form of quantification which takes scope over of all language phenomena:

p: $\forall x \text{ Met}(x)$

Now we have to find some reasonable restriction of the scope of the universal quantifier. First, I shall utilize the word/sentence distinction. The thesis could mean:

P1: Every word is metaphorical.

P2: Every sentence is metaphorical.

Clearly, if every word is metaphorical, then every sentence is metaphorical too, but not vice versa, because for a sentence to be metaphorical it is sufficient that it only contains a metaphorical part, typically a word. When we take a typical overused metaphor “Juliet is the

¹¹ (Wittgenstein 1921, 6.54)

sun”, the word “sun” is interpreted metaphorically whereas the rest of the sentence is taken literally. From this platitude follows that thesis P2 is more plausible than thesis P1.

Next, what does the predicate “metaphorical” mean and apply to? Utilizing the type/token distinction, we can say that metaphorical can apply to a sentence (type) or to an utterance (i.e. a use) of a sentence (token). We can restate thesis P2 as follows:

P3: Every sentence (type) is metaphorical. $\forall s \text{ Met}(s)$

P4: Every use of every sentence is metaphorical. $\forall s \forall u \text{ Met}(u(s))$

It is not difficult to see that these formulations are equivalent. The reason why to consider the double quantified formulation P4 is that it is open to further weakening. One could for example alter the second universal quantifier into the existential one:

P5: There is (some) metaphorical use of every sentence. $\forall s \exists u \text{ Met}(u(s))$

= Every sentence can be used metaphorically.

This formulation of the pervasiveness thesis is, however, too weak; it is almost tautological. Theses P1-P4 face the excluded opposites. In order to escape this trap we have to restrict the extent of the pervasiveness thesis. Such a restriction, however, must not go too far. An excessive restriction could alter the thesis into an empty banality as we saw with thesis P5.

Restrictions of the pervasiveness thesis

My next point is that a restriction of the pervasiveness thesis meets up with an extension of original mechanism of the metaphor that was required by the historical argument. Let us explore some of these restrictions or extensions that are common in philosophy of language and linguistics.

Diachronic restriction

According to the first, let us say a *diachronic*, restriction, the thesis reads that every word has a meaning, which has been derived metaphorically out of a prior meaning. If metaphorical means “derived metaphorically” in addition to being “actually a novel usage of the language,” then the plausibility of pervasiveness thesis P is preserved. This version of it is endorsed in Nietzsche and advocated later in Lakoff and Johnson.

It is easy to see that we can take this idea as a restriction of the pervasiveness thesis or as an extension of the original mechanism or of the scope the original definition. Let us take formulation

P3: Every sentence is metaphorical.

Then its restriction reads:

P3': Every sentence is or has been metaphorical (in the course of the development of language).

A broadening of the original definition is this:

$\text{Met}_{\text{modern}} = \text{“being actually a novel usage of the language”} (= \text{Met}_{\text{classical}}) \text{ or “being derived metaphorically”}$

Take from either end, the result is the same. There is, however, a problem with this approach. It is the problem of what was at the beginning. If all language expressions had been derived metaphorically, then we would not be able to explain what expression was at the beginning of the development of the language. If all language expressions were derived, then there would be no opposite of derived. That implies there must be something that is not derived.¹² The diachronic interpretation of the pervasiveness thesis actually shifts the problem of excluded opposites from “metaphorical” to “derived”.

Contextual restriction

The second restriction (coined as *contextual*) is that every sentence or word can be used or intended metaphorically in a respective context. Formulated from the viewpoint of the reader or listener, it means that every word/sentence can be taken metaphorically or accepted as a metaphor. If a given context has to be taken into account, we have to deal with linguistic expressions as tokens. I will pass over the view that every word can be used metaphorically and proceed directly to the sentences. Thesis

P4: Every use of every sentence is metaphorical $\forall s \forall u \text{ Met}(u(s))$

has to be reformulated that a given sentence is metaphorical in some contexts only, so:

P4': For every sentence, there is a context so that its use in this context is metaphorical.
 $\forall s \exists c \text{ Met}(c(s))$

If the context wholly determined the use of a sentence, the existential quantifier could range over uses of a sentence. Therefore, we have the weak thesis P5:

For every sentence, there is a use such that this sentence is metaphorical.
 $\forall s \exists u \text{ Met}(u(s))$

¹² Herder has an interesting (but on no account indisputable) solution of this problem. The first metaphorical shift was not from an expression but from a *feeling* (whose natural expression is an interjection) to an expression. Herder's solution also lies in excluding the word class of interjections from the scope of the pervasiveness thesis. Here is the key quotation: "Hence the strong, bold metaphors in the roots of the words! Hence the metaphorical transferences from one type of feeling to another, so that the meanings of a stem-word, and still more those of its derivatives, set in contrast with one another, turn into the most motley picture." Or: "The original metaphor was the impulse to speak." (Herder 1772, 113 and 116) Nietzsche advocated a similar view.

As already noted, this thesis is almost tautological.¹³

Gradual restriction

Another way of how to understand the pervasiveness thesis is that every word or sentence is metaphorical to some degree. To be metaphorical would not be a qualitative but a quantitative feature of a sentence/an expression. The original thesis P would become additional adverbial “to some degree”:

P6: All language is metaphorical *to some degree*.

Many authors have made such a proposal. We can take as an illustration the *relevance theory* and its deflationary account of metaphor as presented in (Sperber and Wilson 2008). They argue that metaphor is no distinctive category of the language and “see metaphors as simply a range of cases at one end of a continuum.” They go on: “metaphorical interpretations are arrived at in exactly the same way as these other interpretations,” including literal or hyperbolic ones (Sperber and Wilson 2008, 84) – namely by the processes of broadening and narrowing of the encoded concept (Sperber and Wilson 2008, 92).

We can see that the restriction of the pervasiveness thesis (by an adverbial) amounts to the same thing as the realization of the fact that the original mechanism for metaphor is the same for other parts of language. The deflationary account of metaphor is a typical application of the argument of excluding of opposites as a ladder. Initially, there was an interesting linguistic phenomenon (metaphor) and “metaphor” was a theoretically important notion for studying this phenomenon. After the realization that no distinctive mechanism of this phenomenon could be discovered, we have to adjust our general linguistic theory (the relevance theory) in order to cover this phenomenon. The notion “metaphor” will be no more important. In this sense, such an account of metaphor is *deflationary*.

Metaphor as a theoretical notion

More than thirty years ago, David Rumelhart formulated theoretical options of how the traditional program of semantics and a theory of metaphor could be integrated. If a theory claims the pervasiveness of metaphor, only two options come into question:

1. We could reject the traditional program of semantics and try to formulate a new account of both literal and conveyed meanings.

[...]

4. We could modify the traditional theory to make it work for metaphor as well as literal language. (Rumelhart 1979, 74)

We can take these suggestions as a general approach of accommodating a linguistic theory with a theory of metaphor advocating the pervasiveness thesis. Whichever option we take,

¹³ George Lakoff, for instance, in claiming that metaphorical understanding is the norm admits that there are sentences that are not metaphorical, e.g. “The cat is on the mat” (Lakoff 1993, 205). I think that even these sentences can be taken metaphorically in appropriate contexts.

the old notion of “metaphor” (METAPHOR_{classical} or METAPHOR before the ladder was thrown away) will be integrated into a new linguistic theory and *ipso facto* no more useful. This does not rule out that another notion of metaphor (METAPHOR_{modern} or METAPHOR after the ladder was thrown away) might be useful within the new linguistic theory. This is, or can be seen as, of course, a linguistic innovation that might happen repeatedly and take up a form of dialectical twist. A notion of metaphor is recognized as all-embracing, which leads to adjusting or formulating a new linguistic theory. Within this linguistic theory a new concept of metaphor can set up and used henceforward. This new concept of metaphor might be found out to be all-embracing too. Then again, a new linguistic theory is needed and so forth.

I conclude that after all, a linguistic or philosophical theory decides what counts as a metaphor. A linguistic theory determines criteria for applying the term “metaphor.” “Metaphor” is a theoretical notion. If a theory advocates its omnipresence, which is, by the way, abhorrent to common sense and to the everyday use of the expression “metaphor”, there must be good reasons for doing so.¹⁴

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