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## **METAPHOR IN THE TWILIGHT AREA BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND LINGUISTICS**

Die Metapher ist weit klüger als ihr Verfasser und so sind es viele Dinge.  
Alles hat seine Tiefen. Wer Augen hat der sieht alles in allem.  
Lichtenberg

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I intend to address the issue of whether there is a metaphorical meaning and how this question is related to the borderline between philosophy and linguistics. Firstly, there is no general agreement on how this relation or borderline should be drawn and I will, nevertheless, try to establish one acceptable for my purposes. We can provisionally accept the vague opinion that philosophy of language should provide a conceptual framework for linguistics. The following intuition can help us, however: the question, whether there is such a thing as metaphorical meaning, is a wrong one. One should rather ask whether the concept of linguistic meaning is an appropriate tool to explain the intricate nature of metaphor. Now, it seems that the wrong question belongs to linguistics and the appropriate one to philosophy. But I do not want to suggest such a view. My first question of whether there is a metaphorical meaning has no sense in linguistics. From the linguistic point of view, metaphors are not nonsensical; that is, they must have a meaning. All linguistic behavior must have some meaning; otherwise it would be mere *flatus vocis*. As long as we are using the term “meaning” in such a loose way, there is no hope for resolving the issue.

### **2. Against a metaphorical meaning**

What are the arguments for the hypothesis that the concept of metaphorical meaning is no suitable tool to explain how metaphorical statements work? It has to be underlined that metaphors have always a meaning; they are instances of a false predication or a commonplace. Such a meaning is called *literal* or *primary*. The disputable question is whether it is reasonable to endow them with another meaning, which would be called *metaphorical* or *secondary*. So, the issue is whether metaphor accomplishes something more than a plain falsehood or

triviality. Hence the controversy is how to understand that metaphors accomplish something more. Is the term “accomplish” standing for *mean* or *suggest* or perhaps *intimate*?<sup>1</sup>

Here are the arguments against the idea that metaphors have a secondary meaning: all my arguments can be found with certain modifications in the works of Donald Davidson. Let me begin with the example of the metaphor: “she was a fly, but the others were dragon-flies, butterflies, beautiful insects.” This metaphor by Virginia Woolf (1985: 165) is rather easy to understand. It means that Mabel, the main protagonist of the short story, feels she is ugly at a party because her new dress is not appropriate for the occasion. There is a temptation to take the word *fly* as having the secondary meaning *ugly person*. If it were so, the word “fly” would be ambiguous. In some contexts, it would mean *an insect of the genus Muscidae*, in other contexts *ugly person*. Then, however, if an agent were familiar with this secondary meaning, the sentence “she was a fly” would not be a metaphor at all. It would simply mean she was an ugly person. In this case we need not hunt for resemblances between women and flies. Therefore, an agent must not know the secondary meaning in advance and so there is no reason to postulate such a thing.

Let me introduce a potential counterexample. Consider the metaphorical utterance “Peter is a wolf.” Assuming, of course, Peter is a human being, not an animal. Possible metaphorical meanings of the word “wolf” are: *a fierce or destructive person* or *a man keen on amatory attentions to women*. These interpretations are so common that they can be found in various dictionaries. That means they have been already lexicalized. The utterance “Peter is a wolf” is a *dead metaphor*. But dead metaphors are – that’s my polemical claim – no metaphors at all, they are merely former metaphors.<sup>2</sup> The feeling that the utterance is a metaphor springs from the fact that it once was a metaphor. If a metaphor had any secondary meaning conventionally linked to it, it would be *per definitionem* a dead metaphor. The point can be formulated even sharper: Metaphors do not have any secondary meaning in virtue of their very definition. I hope I have demonstrated that it is convenient to think so.

Our problem is not solved even now. The secondary meaning of a dead metaphor must be somehow active in a genuine metaphor. Two examples have been mentioned and in both cases, it was possible to bring out some metaphorical meanings. It was argued that in genuine metaphors, their metaphorical meanings must not be known before. It is possible, however, to bring out a metaphorical meaning afterwards, so to say, *ex post*. We may understand it as we must have a

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<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid a possible confusion, I use quotation marks for referring to a word or sentence, e.g. “wolf”, and italics for referring to the meaning(s) of that word or sentence, e.g. *a fierce or destructive person*.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the expression “dead metaphor” is itself a metaphor, for the predicate *dead* can be literally applied on a living creature only to mark that he (or it) has died and therefore ceased to be a living creature at all. In a similar way, a dead metaphor has ceased to be a metaphor at all.

linguistic ability to construe a metaphorical meaning unknown in advance. In the rest of my essay, I shall argue that this ability is a necessary and sufficient requirement of our apprehension of metaphors. Moreover, I will give some hints how this ability works or how it could be described.

As was said above, understanding metaphors implies finding a metaphorical meaning (or one can say *the* metaphorical meaning) of a given metaphorical utterance. But how can the listener be sure that a metaphorical meaning is the right one? In the case of a dead metaphor, one will simply appeal to a shared linguistic convention. The dead metaphor “Peter is a wolf” means, of all things, *Peter is a fierce person* because of the conventional connection between the lexical units *wolf* and *fierce person*. In order to understand the statement, it is not necessary to know what wolves and fierce persons have in common, if at all. What about the metaphor “she was a fly”? Assuming there is no prior conventional connection between the lexical units *fly* and *ugly persons*, what would it mean that we have found *the* right metaphorical meaning? We can provisionally propose that to understand a metaphor is to find out the speaker’s intended meaning. Obviously, we have to look around for the context of the utterance. But that is maximum we can do. We cannot be sure that the meaning we have found corresponds to the speaker’s intended meaning. In the case of the utterance “she was a fly” we can be almost sure we have succeeded in finding the intended meaning, but it will not be always the case. Consider, for example, the following highly poetic metaphor “The hour-glass whispers to the lion’s paw” by W. H. Auden (1940: 23). Evidently, the poetic effect of this verse line does not depend on finding the right metaphorical meaning.

If the intended meaning is the wrong coin to measure the appropriateness of the metaphorical meaning, we have to give up the idea that metaphor is a sort of linguistic communication. Even more, we need not presume that any metaphorical meaning was intended and the listener does not need to explore the intentions of the speaker. All the listener has is the context of the utterance and she should find some metaphorical meaning which is in accord with the context. If a speaker wants to prevent such a divergence, she will simply have to drop the use of metaphors.

To make the point again: metaphor accomplishes something more than its literal meaning expresses and this “more” cannot be captured by any secondary meaning. One possible way out is to maintain that what metaphor accomplishes is not of a semantic nature; rather, it operates on a psychological or even a causal basis: “metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact,” Davidson wrote (2001: 262). Quine and especially Rorty advocated very similar views.<sup>3</sup> As is known, there are causal theories of meaning, e.g. by Russell or recently by Kripke, Putnam or Donnellan, which take as the central

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Quine (1979) and Rorty (1987).

question how meaning is causally determined. What we are dealing with now is a causal explanation of how metaphors work in contrast to how the whole of language works. Such causal explanations have their attractions and in some sense they could be correct. But the problem is that they make the relationship between language and world contingent. They are based solely on external relations. What we need is rather an *internal relation*, i.e. a conceptual relation between a metaphorical proposition in question and a description of its effects that is its interpretation. Such a relation does not have the accidental character which causal relations do obviously have.

To be sure, there is a psychological effect caused by a metaphor. But such an effect cannot be entirely random; otherwise we could not understand poetry. Poetry in general is able to control our imagination. Hence, the emergence of the effect must be governed by linguistic tools, in particular by words used in a metaphor and its grammatical structure.

It would be wrong to claim that the author, let's say a poet, has an extraordinary feeling which she wants to pass on. She incorporates this feeling into a metaphor which is properly understood by a listener, if the same feeling has emerged in her also. Metaphor is not a tool to communicate feelings or inner states in general. This scheme is wrong, if only for the reason that we cannot compare mental states of different minds.

What is essential here is a conceptual relation between a metaphorical proposition and its interpretation. In our examples, it was possible to bring out plausible interpretations without any recursion to psychological effects caused by the metaphorical utterances. It was easier done in the example of the colloquial dead metaphor concerning a wolf than in the genuine metaphor by Virginia Woolf. Obviously, this is so because of the linguistic convention underlying the dead metaphor. In investigating this former metaphor we are able to trace back its origin, i.e. the alleged similarity between wolves and humans. The linguistic convention can attract our attention to the fact that there is a similarity which has brought this dead metaphor into being. An analogous process can be employed by the genuine metaphor "she was a fly" except that the role of the convention is now played by the context of the short story. The possible range of the context is, however, not restricted. We can take into account that the story might have been intended as a chapter of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In both cases, all we have to do is to examine linguistic relations without any reference to mental states of involved persons, real or fictional ones. Such an examination may yield a single or a multiple outcome, whose validity may be either timeless (in the case of a dead metaphor) or passing (that would be a genuine metaphor).

Yet, I submit, the same procedure can be applied to the third poetic example by Auden. Hour-glasses do not whisper, they do, however, make a noise as the sand sifts through. This verse is likely an echo of Shakespeare's sonnet № 19: "Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws." The fact that Auden has intended

this allusion plays a subsidiary role and merely increases the relative relevance of this contextual item. Does “hour-glass”, then, stand for *time*? Time is making noise; one might think that it is saying something in passing inevitably away. A plausible interpretation might be that time is passing inevitably for all creatures no matter how mighty they are. Obviously, in this metaphor, we can take advantage of miscellaneous additional knowledge that is not semantically encoded in the involved words. But because of the variety of such knowledge no simple exact method how to interpret metaphors can be formulated.

In conclusion, I would like to say that what is essential in metaphor is not a secondary meaning but an internal relation between a metaphorical proposition and a description of its effects. In order to understand metaphors, we have to share an ability to construe metaphorical meanings at once. The aim of this ability is to uncover an internal relation which lies behind a particular metaphor. In doing so, we can employ all available linguistic as well as non-linguistic knowledge. That is to say, we can utilize all means of etymological analysis, historical or philosophical linguistics and related disciplines. Let me finish this section by quoting T. S. Eliot: “there is no method but to be very intelligent” (1920: 11).

### 3. Postscript on lexicons of metaphors

In the appendix, I want to consider the possibility of a lexicon of metaphors. My motive to do so is twofold: most of the discussion after my talk in Lodz was on this topic and it is just a theme on the borderline between philosophy of language and linguistics. The question is whether there could be a reasonable dictionary of metaphors, if the theory outlined above is sound. If metaphor has no metaphorical meaning, what could be the content of a lexicon entry? As I said, every lexicalized metaphor is a dead one; hence there could not be a lexicon of *genuine* metaphors. But the answer is not straightforward. Actually, there are dictionaries of metaphors, e.g., *Metaphors Dictionary* by Sommer and Weiss (2001). Moreover, there are metaphorical meanings (abbreviated “met.”) frequently listed in entries of monolingual dictionaries. These all are challenges to my approach.

The terms “lexicon” or “dictionary” are obviously family concepts. In order to consider the possibility of a lexicon of metaphors, it has to be specified what is its structure and function. First, the function of such lexicon could be mere listing of all possible metaphors without giving any meanings, interpretations and the like. If we took the metaphor being the predicative construction *A is B*, then we would have to list all possible permutations of two substantives. This is so because each two substantives can be possibly used as a metaphor *A is B* even if this predication is true. The extent of such list would be the second power of the

number of substantives of given language. It is not impossible to make such list, but this idea is apparently futile.

We have to consider a dictionary of metaphors which are picked out according to some criterion and whose structure of an entry is more complex. I want to proceed from the function or aim of a dictionary. The basic aim, to quote from the introduction to *Metaphors Dictionary* by Sommer and Weiss (2001: viii), is “to create a useful and enjoyable source for examples of metaphor in all its permutations”. Such intention is a little bit exaggerated; there are definitely not all possible permutations in this dictionary. The following manifesto tells us how the entries have been selected:

For utmost comprehensiveness, entries span the entire timeline of history and illustrate origination and use by poets, novelists, prose writers, speech writers [,] journalists, scientists, philosophers, business people, actors, students, and “just plain folks”. Sommer and Weiss (2001: viii)

In this dictionary, there are metaphors which can be attributed to a prominent author, for example 800 metaphors from Shakespeare. I want to label such a criterion as *literary*.

What is the structure of an entry of this dictionary? A quotation, its source and sometimes a commentary. For instance the metaphor “She was a fly” mentioned above is provided with a commentary: “Mabel is worried about the cut of her new dress, which causes her to feel insecure in a fashionable world” (Sommer and Weiss 2001: 377). This is clearly an interpretation which is valid in the original context of this (genuine) metaphor. However, it does not rule out that another interpretation would be appropriate in another context. Thus the subject of a typical entry is not a particular (genuine) metaphor, but a particular use – i.e. a *token* – of a (for the most part genuine) metaphor.

For another account of how to pick out particular metaphors, I want to take the well-known book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). It is not a dictionary in a proper sense, but I regard the book as a mere dictionary for there are many metaphors listed and also for the philosophical implications of this book which I do not share. Here is an example of an entry (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 5, italics theirs):

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument. His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*. He *shot down* all of my arguments.

This structure is occurring on almost every page in the book. The heading written in capital letters is a metaphor followed by “a list of ordinary expressions that are special cases of the metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 47). These criteria for how these metaphors are chosen is that they should, in ideal cases, cover our ordinary literal language. Let me call these criteria *linguistic*. In this entry, there are gathered literal expressions that are taken as *dead* metaphors from some area of interest. For example the word “demolish” means besides other things *disprove* in some contexts. There is a conventional link between these two linguistic units. The statement “I *demolished* his argument” is a dead metaphor similar to my example with wolf.

These dead metaphors are now traced back to an original metaphor utilizing not only etymological analysis but also diverse additional knowledge (for instance, the ethnological platitude that real war was replaced by argumentative behavior in some stage of our process of civilizing). These original metaphors (called *conceptual metaphors* by the authors) are further categorized into larger classes labeled, e.g., orientational, ontological or structural metaphors. The notion of conceptual metaphor is, of course, an idealization; that is, one cannot take it as evidence that a certain conceptual metaphor used to be employed in some earlier stage of the development of our language and passed to literal language thereafter. So far, so good; there is no disagreement between us.

What sort of dictionary do we have here? It is a catalog of (genuine) metaphors (e.g., “argument is war”) together with a list of literal statements which can be seen as a list of particular interpretations. The authors call them “special cases of the metaphor”, which, I think, is misleading, because they are only dead metaphors, i.e. not metaphors at all. Hence, the subject of an entry is in this case a genuine metaphor – here taken as a *type* – with some of its interpretations which are settled in our contemporary language as literal statements.<sup>4</sup> The value of this book lies, as I see it, in this ingenious grouping of literal language into clusters determined by an idealized metaphor or a metaphorical scheme – that is to say, the value is its linguistic part taken as a lexicon. Lakoff and Johnson try to find implicit metaphors governing our everyday language and thus – in my words –

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<sup>4</sup> I cannot refrain from a few comments on philosophical implications of this book. Lakoff and Johnson are convinced that all (or most of) literal statements can be traced back to their original metaphor. From this experimental discovery they conclude that “most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts”. No concepts “are understood directly, without metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 57). Thus we face the thesis about the omnipresence of metaphors in our language which is already known in its classic formulations in Herder or Nietzsche. What can be concluded from the huge experimental basis which Lakoff and Johnson have employed is that almost all words and sentences are *dead* metaphors, i.e. that for the most part our language consists of dead metaphors. This is not surprising; thus, there is no reason for the far-reaching philosophical implications asserted by the authors so categorically.

they endeavor to reveal internal relations in it. This approach can teach us much about the internal structure of our language and its development. There are, however, other ways of how a language can evolve; for instance, borrowings from other languages or formation of neologisms.

For the third type of our lexicon I take reflections on metaphor by Jorge Luis Borges, especially from *This Craft of Verse* (2000). He begins the lecture named “Metaphor” with the question of why poets should be using the same stock of metaphors when there are so many possible combinations (Borges 2000: 22). Unlike in the preceding case, Borges makes a clear distinction between dead and genuine metaphors and subsequently discusses only the latter ones (i.e. “metaphors that *are* felt as metaphors by the reader”, Borges 2000: 23). He proposes that there are only about a dozen patterns of metaphors. Metaphors belonging to one pattern are quite different to the imagination but almost the same to the logical thinking (Borges 2000: 23). Although there are thousands of metaphors, most of them can be traced back to few simple patterns; such metaphors being so-called *variations* of the pattern. That is to understand that the same logical form *A is B* can be uncovered in metaphors belonging to one pattern, but the way how they are presented and imagined may be different. There are, however, metaphors “that may not be traced back to definite patterns” (Borges 2000: 41). His examples of such patterns are *stars and eyes, time and river, life and dream, death and sleep, women and flowers, fire and battle*. Examples of metaphors without any pattern are “the moon is the mirror of time” or the kenning for sea as the whale-road.

Let us take the pattern *time and river* and examine its variations. The first is a verse line by Tennyson: “Time flowing in the middle of the night,” the second example is the title of the novel “Of Time and River” by Thomas Wolfe, the third one is, of course, Heraclites’ famous fragment B91: “No man steps twice into the same river.” Borges’ last example is taken from Jorge Manrique:

Our lives are rivers, gliding free  
To that unfathomed sea, boundless sea,  
The silent grave!<sup>5</sup>

Thus we have four examples of genuine metaphors which can be traced back to the pattern *time and river*, even though they do not contain both of these terms. Borges’ approach resembles the previous one but there are only genuine metaphors as the subject here.

In the next step, we can ask what metaphors belonging under some pattern, distinct from the rest of metaphors, have in common. These metaphors without

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<sup>5</sup> A translation by Longfellow.

any pattern are only arbitrary games expressing merely astonishing affinities;<sup>6</sup> there are, however, *essential affinities* captured in the stock patterns.<sup>7</sup> The concept of essential affinity resembles my concept of *internal relation* or the concept of absolute metaphor which will be discussed later. These metaphors must have an essential feature allowing them to be patterned on, for they have to be in accord with poet's emotion (Borges 2000: 94). Thus I'd like to call this criterion of how to pick out salient metaphors *poetical*. An entry would consist of a genuine metaphor (that is one of the patterns, i.e. *types*) accompanied by some of its significant variations (examples of *tokens*).

My last model of a lexicon of metaphors comes from the discipline called *metaphorology* which goes back to the seminal work of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (1960). Even this book is not a dictionary in a proper sense, but if metaphorology is an inquiry into significant philosophical metaphors, we can ask how such metaphors are collected and what can be said about their meaning. To be sure, metaphorology is not another theory of metaphor in our modern sense, i.e. an analysis of the concept of metaphor, but an investigation of some prominent instances of this concept.<sup>8</sup>

The first aim of the metaphorology is to substantiate the existence of so called *absolute metaphors*. Those are metaphors that cannot be translated into (or returned to) the literal language (Blumenberg 1999: 10). Blumenberg's initial *hypothesis* is that there are metaphors which cannot be *wholly* explained by means of literal language in any stage of its development, they are, so to speak, "resistant" (Blumenberg 1999: 12). The concept of absolute metaphor is thus even stronger than mine of genuine metaphor, since absolute metaphors are resistant *all the time*. That is to understand that Blumenberg tacitly presumes a theory of metaphor, which must be very much alike to the theory I am advocating. The fact that an absolute metaphor cannot be translated into literal language – and this is the second step in Blumenberg's project – does not prevent it from replacing or correcting another absolute metaphor. Such transformations take place in history and they are the proper subject of the metaphorology (Blumenberg 1999: 12f).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an argument that metaphors cannot be based on surprises see Davidson (2001: 252f); a contrary position is to be found in Rorty (1987).

<sup>7</sup> In several of his essays and short stories Borges writes that he wished, as a young man, to invent new metaphorical patterns, but this effort ended in failure (cf., e.g., his autobiographical short stories "Averroës' Search" or "The Other").

<sup>8</sup> The ancient meaning of the Greek word *θεωρία* is *looking at*. Metaphorology might be a theory of metaphor in this sense.

<sup>9</sup> My inquiry is confined only to the role of metaphors in the language which is given in Blumenberg (1960). In his subsequent works, Blumenberg investigates the anthropological function of absolute metaphors, which can be summed up as follows: people are not able to endure the Absolute, so they have to gain a distance from it; absolute metaphors can establish such a distance and thus help to ease the pressure of the Absolute.

What are Blumenberg's examples of absolute metaphors? For instance, if one would think about truth as *mighty* or *naked*: "truth is mighty" or "truth is naked." There are also a lot of metaphors about the world: "the world (order) is (like) a machine" (*machina mundi*) or "the world is a clockwork." These two metaphors are not mutually independent, but the latter is a certain specification of the former. In numerous quotations from philosophers and scientists, Blumenberg tries to show how the *machina mundi* metaphor was transformed into the clockwork-metaphor with the dawning of the Enlightenment (Blumenberg 1999: 91-110). In order to do so, he needs to examine *consequences* of this or that particular metaphor by various thinkers. A set of non-contradictory consequences of a metaphor is what I am calling its *interpretation*.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up: Blumenberg takes a particular metaphor, for instance, "the world is a machine," and examines its particular interpretations, e.g. in Cicero, Cusanus and Descartes. Then he shows that these interpretations can be gradually seen as interpretations of another metaphor, say "the world is a clockwork." Therefore, the subject of an imaginary entry is, like in the preceding cases, a genuine metaphor taken as a type with some of its interpretations which were significant in its history. In addition to that, Blumenberg investigates relations between these absolute metaphors. As was said, there is an internal relation between a metaphor and its interpretation. Metaphorology is then a discipline that examines (internal) relations between interpretations, which leads to (due to the transitivity) internal relations between genuine metaphors.

As well, the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Blumenberg's metaphorology or Borges' essays certainly deserve more attention than I could pay to them. My intention was to discuss the four approaches – literary, linguistic, poetic and philosophic – which treat how to gather and handle genuine metaphors from the perspective of my account; that is, on the one hand, metaphors have no secondary meaning and on the other, there subsists an internal relation between a metaphor and its interpretation. What still remains to be answered is the question of whether there could be a lexicon of metaphors which would exhaust all possible interpretations of every single genuine metaphor. It should now be obvious that the answer must be negative.

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<sup>10</sup> This does not rule out that there might be different interpretations which partly overlap; if taken together, they are contradictory.

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