

Metaphor in the Twilight Area between Philosophy and Linguistics

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

first of all, I'd like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to present my talk on this meeting in Lodz. Although no special section concerning metaphors has been assumed, the preceding talks have shown that an unofficial section has spontaneously emerged, which supports the actuality of the topic.

In my talk, I intend to address the issue whether there is a metaphorical meaning and how is this question related to the borderline between philosophy and linguistics. Firstly, there is no (and maybe nor have to be) a general agreement, how this relation or borderline should be drawn and I'll only try to find an acceptable one for my purposes. We can provisionally accept the vague opinion that philosophy of language should provide a conceptual framework for linguistics. However, the following intuition can help us: The question, whether there is such a thing as metaphorical meaning, is wrong. It should rather read, whether the concept of linguistic meaning is an appropriate tool to explain the intricate nature of the metaphor. Now it seems that the wrong question belongs to linguistics and the appropriate one to philosophy. But I don't want to suggest such a view. My first question of whether there is a metaphorical meaning have no sense in linguistics. From this point of view, metaphors are not nonsensical, that is, they must have a meaning. All linguistic behavior must have some meaning; else 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.

What are the arguments for the hypothesis that the concept of metaphorical meaning is no suitable tool to explain the way 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. The controversy is, hence, how to understand that metaphors accomplish something more. Is the term “accomplish” standing for “mean” or “suggest” or perhaps “intimate”?

Now to the promised arguments against the idea that metaphors have a secondary meaning. All my arguments can be found with certain modifications by Donald Davidson. Let me begin with an example of the metaphor: “she was a fly, but the others were dragonflies, butterflies, beautiful insects”¹. This metaphor by Virginia Woolf 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 that the word “fly” must have 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 “ugly person”. Then, however, if an agent were familiar with this secondary meaning, the sentence “she was a fly” wouldn’t be a metaphor at all. It would simply mean she was an ugly person. In this case, we don’t need to 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 possible 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

¹ Virginia Woolf: “The New Dress”, in: *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, London: Hogarth Press, 1985, p. 165.

dictionaries. That means they have been already lexicalized. The utterance “Peter is a wolf” is a death metaphor. But death metaphors are no metaphors at all, they are only former metaphors. The feeling that our utterance is a metaphor springs from the fact that it was once a metaphor. The argument can be formulated even sharper: metaphors don’t have a secondary meaning because they are so defined. I hope I’ve demonstrated that it is convenient to do so.

Our problem is still not solved. The secondary meaning of a death metaphor must be somehow active in a genuine metaphor. I’ve mentioned two examples and in both cases, it was possible to bring out some metaphorical meanings. I’ve argued that the metaphorical meanings must be not known before in genuine metaphors. It is possible, however, to bring out the metaphorical meaning afterwards, so to say, *ex post*. This may be understood that we must have a linguistic ability to construe a metaphorical meaning unknown in advance. In the rest of my talk, I shall argue that this ability is necessary and sufficient requirement of our apprehension of metaphors. Moreover I’ll give some hints how this ability works or how it could be described.

I’ve suggested that to apprehend or understand metaphors implies to find a metaphorical meaning (or shall I say *the* metaphorical meaning?) of a given metaphorical utterance. But how can be the recipient sure what metaphorical meaning is the right one? In the case of a death metaphor, he or she will simply appeal to a shared linguistic convention. The death metaphor “Peter is a wolf” means, of all things, Peter is a fierce person because of the lexical 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 it means 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 need to look around for the context of the utterance. That is, however, the most we can do. We cannot be sure that the meaning we have found corresponds with the speaker’s intended meaning. In the case of the utterance “she is a fly”, we can be almost sure we have succeeded in finding the intended

meaning, but it doesn't need to 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.² To be sure, 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 don't need to presume that any metaphorical meaning was intended and the recipient doesn't need to explore speaker's intentions. All he has is the context of the utterance and he or she should find any metaphorical meaning which is in accord with the context. If a speaker wants to prevent such a divergence, he will have to cease using metaphors.

To make the point again: metaphor accomplishes something more than its literal meaning express and this "more" cannot be captured by any secondary meaning. One possible way out is to maintain that what metaphor accomplishes is not of semantic nature and it works on psychological or even causal basis: "metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact,"³ wrote Davidson. Quine and especially Rorty advocated very similar conceptions. As known, there are causal theories of meaning, for example by Russell or recently by Kripke, Putnam or Donnellan, which take the central question of meaning to be questioned about how meaning is causally determined. What we are dealing now is a causal explanation how metaphors work in contrast to how the whole language works. Such causal explanations have their attractions and in some sense they must 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 between a metaphorical proposition in question and a description of its effects. Such a relation doesn't have the accidental character which causal relations do.

² Wystan Hugh Auden: "Our Bias", in: *Another Time: Poems*, London: Random House, 1940, p. 23.

³ Donald Davidson: "What Metaphors Mean", in: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 262.

There must be a psychological effect caused by a metaphor. Such an effect cannot be entirely random, otherwise we couldn't 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 structure.

I don't want to be misunderstood. It would be wrong to claim that the author, for example a poet, has an extraordinary feeling, which he wants to pass on. He incorporates this feeling into a metaphor, which is properly understood by a recipient if the same feeling has emerged. This scheme is wrong, if only 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 death metaphor about a wolf than in the genuine metaphor by Virginia Woolf. Obviously, it is so because of the linguistic convention in the death metaphor. In investigating this death 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 the similarity, which has brought this death 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 extent of the context is, however, not crucial. 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. Such an examination may yield a single or a multiple outcome, whose validity may be either timeless (in the case of a death 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 don't whisper, they do, however, make a noise, though, as the sand sifts through. This verse is perhaps an echo of Shakespeare's sonnet: "Devouring Time, blunt

thou the lion's paw."⁴ Does "hour-glass", then, stand for "time"? Also time is making noise, which might be thought of as "saying" or "passing inevitably". Why is this addressed to the lion's paw? 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 various additional knowledge, which is not semantically encoded in the involved words. But because of the variety of such knowledge no exact method how to interpret metaphors can be formulated.

In conclusion let me sum up my position in a few words. What is essential in the metaphor is not a secondary meaning but an internal relation between a metaphorical proposition and 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 the internal relation, which lies behind the metaphor in question. In doing so, we can employ available linguistic as well as non-linguistic knowledge. That is to say, we can utilize all methods of etymological analysis, historical linguistics or even psycholinguistics.

Thank you for your very kind attention and I'm looking forward to your questions, remarks or even a disproving of my false beliefs.

Selected bibliography:

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- Rorty, R.: "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 61 (1987), pp 283-296.

⁴ Sonnet Nr. 19.