

LEXICAL MEANING AND METAPHOR

Pieter A. M. Seuren

1. Metaphor and semantic change

Lakoff and Johnson, in their book *Metaphors we live by* of 1980, show with a wealth of examples that our daily vocabulary is replete with items that are used, sometimes predominantly, in what may be seen as modifications of their historically original meanings, a phenomenon they call ‘metaphor’. Without calling into question the many facts they present, I wish to point out that what they describe as ‘metaphor’ is in fact an instance of the much more general processes involved in the dynamics of lexical meanings, driven by cognitive and cultural factors.

No-one will doubt that virtually all of our nonconcrete vocabulary is based on conventionalized extensions, specializations and cognitive transfer of pristine meanings, which have sometimes completely disappeared and have to be reconstructed by methods of comparative philology. Let us consider a few examples from the vast multitudes that are available, especially in the Indo-European languages, whose history is best known. German *lesen*, like Latin *legere*, now means ‘read’, but the original meaning was ‘pick out, select’, as is still apparent in the German *Auslese* and its English counterpart *selection* (which has the Latin prefix *se-* meaning ‘apart’). The meaning ‘read’ was conventionalized, and new words had to be sought for the expression of the concept of picking out. In Modern Greek, ‘read’ is translated as *diavázo*, which originally meant ‘go through’. The Classical Greek word for ‘truth’ is *alétheia*, meaning ‘the property of not being hidden’, containing the root *lath-*, also known from *lethargy* and *latent*. Latin *felix* (‘happy’) meant originally ‘fertile’, with the root *fée-* of the same meaning, also found in Latin words like *femina* (‘woman’, literally ‘she who suckles’) or *fenus* (‘interest on capital’). The word *capital* is derived from Latin *caput* (‘head’). The word *town* originally meant ‘fence’ (like its German cognate *Zaun*), then, by metonymy, ‘enclosure’, then, by specialization, ‘town’.

All of the philosophical terminology is derived from terms with a concrete meaning, and much of it has penetrated the vocabulary of ordinary life. The term *proposition*, translated from the Greek *prótesis* coined by Aristotle, had the original, transparent

meaning of 'that which is spread out before one' but was introduced to denote the mental assignment of a property to an entity, such as can be expressed in a linguistic utterance. Since then the word has lent itself to all kinds of further applications in the languages of Europe. We *express* our thoughts, not using physical pressure in acts of squeezing, but using grammar in acts of speech. The word *metaphor* itself is a case in point. The original meaning of the Greek *metaphorá* is 'transport', but it then also started to mean 'conveyance' (of property), 'change' (but not in the sense of 'small cash') and finally 'metaphor'. With the exception of 'change' all these meanings have survived into Modern Greek, though the word is now also used for 'removal' in the again specialized sense of moving furniture from one house to another.

Are all such examples cases of metaphor? Probably not, but the point is that the examples that may reasonably be categorized as 'metaphorical' form an integral and inseparable part of the entire vast dynamism of lexical meaning and change of meaning. Lakoff & Johnson single out a class of cases they call 'metaphors', but it is not clear what justifies this selection. Virtually all of their examples illustrate conventionalized semantic developments where the original meaning is still somehow present. Typical examples are the following: *the [foundation, buttressing, construction, collapse] of a theory*, where theories are seen as buildings (p. 46), *make an [impression, mark]*, where sensations are seen as instances of physical impact (p. 50), *something changes [from, out of] X into Y* (p. 74), where an entity's state is compared with a shelter or garb that can be left or entered. Time is seen as an object that 'flies' towards us from the unknown, so that one *looks forward* to the future, which is *ahead of us*, while an event *x* that is later than an event *y* *follows y* (p. 41-2). (In Homer and much of Classical Greek literature, however, man is seen as walking backward into the future. The future is behind and the past in front of us, because we can 'see' the past but the future can only be guessed.)

Clearly, examples of this nature can be multiplied ad nauseam. But why only examples whose original meaning is still present or at least recoverable? Why include cases like *vision*, where the link with 'seeing' is still present, and exclude cases like *culture*, where the link with the tilling of land, as in *agriculture*, has been lost, or so it seems? It would appear that the wider viewpoint, which takes into account all forms of lexical semantic change, is more fruitful for an understanding of both language and cognition. This was done, for example, in Stern (1931), where careful and comprehensive analyses and categorizations are presented of lexical semantic change, following a tradition that started with Aristotle and ancient rhetoric. In rough outline, Stern distinguishes conventionalized semantic extensions, specializations (narrowings), transfers (from part to whole or vice versa, or by association of adjacency or similarity, or by comparison, etc.), giving large numbers of examples of all of these categories of change, mostly taken from the lexicon of English. The picture that emerges is one that demands an explanation in terms of both cognitive and cultural categories – a task yet to be accomplished.

Lakoff & Johnson admit as much:

We do not know very much about the experiential bases of metaphors. Because of our ignorance in this matter, we have described the metaphors separately, only later adding speculative notes on their possible experiential bases. We are adopting this practice out of ignorance, not out of principle. *In actuality, we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis.* (italics original)

Lakoff & Johnson (1980:19)

But this means that they have, in fact, attempted to reduplicate part of the work done by Stern and others, imposing the narrower viewpoint of metaphor. The traditional method, exemplified in Stern (1931), seems a great deal sounder. In both cases, taxonomies are set up and no explanations are ventured beyond the intuitive and the obvious. But Stern does not look exclusively at metaphor.

In general, processes of lexical semantic change are in fact conventionalized instances of processes that start as individual innovations in creative language use. I.A. Richards spoke of poetic language as a "movement among meanings". The same can be said of lexical semantic change, the only difference being that the latter must be recorded in dictionaries, while the former need not be.

2. Consequences for the theory of truth

By the time 'creative' handling of a lexical meaning has become conventionally accepted and must be considered part of the standard lexicon of the language in question, the tension between 'literal' truth and metaphorically or otherwise modified descriptions has vanished. Lakoff & Johnson, however, express the view that facts such as those they present in their book show that the classical Aristotelian objectivist theory of truth is untenable. Instead, they opt for a relativistic notion of truth, whereby "truth is always relative to a conceptual system that is defined in large part by metaphor" (p. 159). Their argument goes as follows:

Metaphors ... are conceptual in nature. They are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality. Yet they are typically viewed within philosophy as matters of 'mere language,' and philosophical discussions of metaphor have not centered on their *conceptual nature*, their contribution to understanding, or their function in cultural reality. Instead, philosophers have tended to look at metaphors as out-of-the-ordinary imaginative or poetic linguistic expressions, and their discussions have centered on whether these linguistic expressions can be true. Their concern with truth comes out of a concern with objectivity: truth for them means *objective, absolute* truth. The typical philosophical conclusion is that metaphors cannot directly state truths, and, if they can state truths at all, it is only indirectly, via some non-metaphorical 'literal' paraphrase. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:159)

This argument, however, is not entirely flawless, partly because, since Plato's and Aristotle's day, the classical notion of truth as correspondence has laboured under an ambiguity, according to whether the correspondence is said to hold between what is *said* and what is the case, or between what is *thought* and what is the case (Stegmüller 1957:16-17; Seuren 1998:12-18; 138). The former is the *verbal*, the latter the *cognitive* notion of truth. This ambiguity, though neglected or overlooked for many centuries, is easily solved in favour of the cognitive notion, in which case much of Lakoff & Johnson's argument vanishes. It is true that logic, and much of modern Anglo-American philosophy with it, has held on to the verbal notion (though for Frege, as well as for Dummett (1964:97), "it is the *thought* (proposition) which is what is true or false"). Lakoff & Johnson are certainly right in criticising that, hopefully transient, limitation, but the objectivist correspondence theory of truth does not seem to be affected by it.

Their extrapolation, moreover, to the entire history of Western philosophy and linguistics seems unwarranted. In their Preface they write:

Within a week we discovered that certain assumptions of contemporary philosophy and linguistics that have been taken for granted within the Western tradition since the Greeks precluded us from even raising the kind of issues we want to address.

(Lakoff & Johnson 1980:ix)

But even a superficial acquaintance with the history of these subjects shows that the Quinean limitations of 20th century philosophy, as well as the structuralist restrictions of modern linguistics, are not shared by 'the Western tradition since the Greeks', which has, in fact, paid ample attention to the kind of issues these authors want to address, even at the level of ordinary conventionalized language. The ancient tradition of etymologizing, starting with Plato's *Cratylus*, bears witness to that. Aristotle, likewise, did not think at all that metaphors are "matters of 'mere language'". Nor, for that matter, does Davidson (1980), for whom "the attempt to give literal expression to the content of the [literary] metaphor is simply misguided." (But then, a week hardly suffices for even a superficial acquaintance with these subjects.)

While it is not entirely clear what these authors mean by the phrases they use in their defence of a relativistic truth theory, they seem to repeat the strategy followed by the ancient Sophists, who likewise used phenomena of lexical meaning as arguments against the objectivist correspondence theory, and in favour of their relativistic truth theory. The Sophists used examples like *There is a pleasant breeze*, where truth or falsity crucially depend on factors of human experience, and not on the physical qualities of the air movement concerned. Experiential or conceptual factors, however, do not speak against the notion of objective truth, since they are, or should be, incorporated into the mapping procedure implied in the (verbal or cognitive) notion of correspondence. To say that there is a pleasant breeze is to say that there is air movement going on that is commonly experienced as being agreeable by humans exposed to it. And that can be objectively true or false.

As long, that is, as we accept the notion of objectivity, because that is where the crux lies. Since Descartes, Hume and Kant, philosophers have become increasingly aware of the fact that all knowledge is the result of processes of mental, cognitive construction, where the relation to what is 'out there', in the outside world, if there is anything at all, is by definition undefinable. What the thing that you and I perceive as the chair over there actually corresponds to in the bare world is not known and cannot be known: Kant's 'Ding and sich' is in principle unknowable, nor is its real existence provable. It follows that absolute, provable certainty is unattainable. It is a natural gift of humans to trust in the reliability of what they consider their knowledge, and to live as if they had certainty. This primeval and all-encompassing 'inductive leap' is bred into all forms of animal intelligence and is necessary for survival.

Modern relativistic theories of truth find support in the fact that there is no philosophically, logically or empirically grounded theory of certainty. Truth, if real, is thus taken to be unattainable and uncertifiable, and will have to remain a remote metaphysical notion, well outside the reach of humans. Objectivist theories of truth, on the other hand, find comfort in the experiential fact that we live reliably by our intuitive notions of truth and falsity, and in the fact that society and life in general would collapse without them. Relativists thus prey on the lack of provability. Objectivists follow common sense and venture the leap into the real but unprovable. It does not seem that Lakoff & Johnson's notions of metaphor make any difference either way.

3. Consequences for the theory of meaning

They do make a difference, however, for the treatment of meaning. Lakoff & Johnson are right in stating that current truth-conditional, model-theoretic semantic theories are unable to account for the phenomena they observe. But this goes for virtually all forms of lexical semantic change as well as for phenomena of flexible meaning application in ordinary linguistic usage. In the realm of lexical meaning, ghosts of the past go on quivering for a long time in intangible ways, while the present casts its shadows ahead in forms of usage that are surprising and innovative now but may well become part of conventional language later.

Take the case of those well-known objects in roads and streets that are called *speed bumps* in America and *sleeping policemen* in Britain. The German word for these things is *Schwelle*. Yet although the nearest English translation equivalent of *Schwelle* is *threshold*, it is unthinkable that speed bumps should be called *thresholds* in English. Why does the German word lend itself to this derived use (whether metaphorical or not), while the English equivalent does not? The answer is not directly given, but it seems to lie in the fact that although the two words cover the same set of things in the real world (in their literal or primary meaning), they somehow express different functions. At some ill-understood level of interpretation, perhaps fed by factors to do with etymology, the word *threshold* implies an end point or a transition from one kind of space to another, while a *Schwelle* is a swelling in the ground that forms an obstacle to be got over. This difference, no matter how it is based in cognition, is not a question of the ontological properties of the objects concerned, but of the different ways in which they are conceived of. While such phenomena should be accounted for in any sound theory of lexical meaning, they fall by definition outside the scope of truth-conditional, model-theoretic semantics, which analyses merely the direct but imputed (Ogden & Richards 1923:11) relation between words and things.

Analogous arguments are easily set up for virtually all forms of semantic change categorized by scholars like Stern, or Lakoff & Johnson, and also for cases of genuine, nonconventionalized metaphor or whatever other kind of nonliteral semantic modification is found in creative writing and speaking. Cognition is an indispensable element in any sound theory of meaning, not only for lexical semantics but also for sentence semantics in a wide sense. And it is lacking in current forms of formal semantics.

4. Presupposition as an element in a cognitive theory of meaning

It is, therefore, mandatory that semantic theory should be fundamentally restructured. It should integrate the study of cognition, or rather be integrated into it. One specific element, in this vast issue, is the study of presuppositions. Presuppositions are conditions to be fulfilled by preceding discourse for the carrier sentence to be interpretable. (For a more extensive analysis of the notion of presupposition, see, for example, Seuren (1994).)

They are derivable specifically from the lexical preconditions of predicates. Let this be illustrated by the following examples (where '>>' stands for 'presupposes'):

- | | | | | |
|--------|----------------------------|----|------------------------|---------------|
| (1) a. | David is divorced | >> | David was once married | (categorical) |
| b. | Only David laughed | >> | David laughed | (focus) |
| c. | David knows that I am bald | >> | I am bald | (factive) |
| d. | David is bald | >> | David exists | (existential) |

The presuppositions of these sentences embody conditions that must be fulfilled by preceding discourse, in the sense that the discourse must either contain or allow for the addition of the information contained in the presuppositions. This makes for coherent bits of discourse when the presupposition is presented first, followed by the carrier sentence:

- (2) a. David was once married but he is divorced now.
 b. David laughed, and he was the only one to laugh.
 c. I am bald and David knows that I am.
 d. David exists, and he is bald.

The source of this phenomenon appears to lie in a particular distinction within the *information features* or IF of the predicates in question. The IF of a predicate P contain the amount of information or cognitive content made available to the listener with regard to the argument term representations in the discourse domain **D** on interpretation of the utterance in question. That is, the IF of P are assigned to the term representations and thus added ('incremented') to the discourse domain **D**. The IF of P are the (cognitively richer) discourse-semantic counterpart of what in model theory is known as the (cognitively poorer) satisfaction conditions of P. There, the satisfaction conditions of a predicate P are the conditions that must be fulfilled by the entity or entities *e* denoted by the argument terms of P for the proposition resulting from applying P to *e* to be true. Thus, it is part of the satisfaction conditions of the predicate *bald* that the entity said to be bald must lack hair on his head. Analogously, it is part of the IF of *bald* that the information regarding the entity's lacking scalp hair is added (incremented) to **D**.

The particular distinction mentioned in the first sentence of the preceding paragraph consists in the fact that some IF must be incremented first, before the remainder can be incremented. Thus, in the case of *bald*, if I say that David is bald, there must first be a representation of a person David (an 'address') in **D**, say a[David]. For truth it is necessary that the corresponding person really exists; for comprehension that is not required. Furthermore, the representation a[David] must contain the preliminary information that it is normal for persons like the one represented in a[David] to have hair growth in prototypical places of the body, in particular the head. Only then can the relevant message that the scalp hair that is normally there is not there, be added to a[David] in **D**. The latter kind of information we call the *update information features* or UIF. The former we call the *preliminary information features* or PIF. In terms of model theory this distinction can be matched in the satisfaction conditions: the PIF are then made to correspond to 'preconditions', the UIF to 'update conditions'.

This account functions well for cases like (1a,c,d), with their main predicates *divorced*, *know* and *bald*, respectively. But how about (1b), with its focus presupposition *only*? The answer is not provided in a few words. It requires a grammatical analysis of focus sentences in which the focus particle, in this case *only*, is seen to be the main predicate. For (1b) this would amount to an analysis of the sentence in terms of 'David was the only one who laughed', with the predicate 'be the only one'. We shall not go

into this question here, as it would take us too far from the topic under discussion, but see Seuren (1996:315-23) for some comment.

When **D**, for whatever reason, 'refuses' the PIF, the utterance in question does not fit into **D** and will be uninterpretable: it 'makes no sense' – unless there is the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation, about which more below. When, on the other hand, **D** accepts the PIF, the UIF will be added automatically.

Note that truth values play no role in these processes. Truth and falsity are relevant only *after* each successive increment has been made to **D**. When a truth value is to be ascertained, then the refusal of a PIF by **D** will, according to the principles of logic and model theory, result in falsity (the 'radically false' value in PPC₃; see Seuren (2000), Seuren et al. (to appear)). Falsity, i.e. 'minimal falsity', likewise results when a UIF or update condition is not fulfilled. But in the latter case, comprehension has been unproblematic; it is just that the information supplied is not true.

The difference is a little like saying, on the one hand, of my motor car that it is bald, and, on the other, saying of my hirsute son that he is bald. The former kind of falsity is somehow worse than the latter. Or differently again, saying that Reagan was the youngest president in the history of the USA is somehow less bad than saying that the queen of England's dog was, because we know that dogs cannot become president of the USA. In discourse-semantic terms this means that **D** will refuse the (post hoc) incrementation of the queen of England's dog being at one time president of the USA. But the information that Reagan was at one time president of the USA passes without a hitch, and so does the information that he was the youngest president ever, even if that information is (minimally) false. Language seems to have capitalized on this difference, by making the distinction between the PIF and the UIF a systematic property of the lexicon.

The functionality of presuppositions in language is obvious. Since PIF are built into the IF of predicates, presuppositions are recoverable from the carrier sentences for any competent speaker of the language in question. This makes it unnecessary to spell out the presuppositions in full so as to make the discourse comprehensible. In this way, much of what has to be said can be left unsaid because it is silently understood from the little that is said. Sentence sequences like (2a-d) above are somehow redundant, since the first member of each pair of sentences is recoverable from the second. This redundant overlap in a sentence **S** not only makes it unnecessary to actually pronounce the presuppositions, it also provides a test to decide whether **S** is suitable for any given **D**. Sentences, in other words, are implicit bits of text.

5. Metaphors as category mistakes

But the presuppositional machinery has proved to be functional also in at least one other way, assisted by the general cognitive powers of natural language speakers. When a PIF of a predicate clearly cannot be applied (or a categorial precondition is clearly violated), one speaks of a *category mistake*. Thus a sentence like:

(3) My motor car is bald.

if taken literally, is unincrementable, and hence uninterpretable, in any **D** on account of its containing a gross category mistake, motor cars not being the kind of objects of

which it makes sense to say that they are bald. But humans do not give up their effort at interpreting utterances that quickly. There appears to be a universal pressure to safeguard interpretability: listeners try all the rules in the book to make sense of what has been said.

In (3), the category mistake is just silly, and the example was merely made up to show what happens when category mistakes are made and there is no possibility of a metaphorical interpretation. But what, then, is metaphorical interpretation, and why does (3) not allow for it? We may come close to answering the first question, but the second will prove beyond our reach.

The examples discussed in the literature on metaphors are not all of the same kind. When a man says (4a) to his sweetheart or (4b) to his wife:

(4) a. You are my sunshine.

b. This orange is a lemon. (courtesy of Liliane Tasmowski-de Rijck)

he may be using a metaphor, let us say a *declarative metaphor*, but it is not the kind of metaphor we want to discuss here, even though there are many interesting features to be discovered. What we have in mind is more the sort of metaphorical usage demonstrated in cases like (5a-c), which we shall call *implicit metaphors*. (5a-c) are all taken from high quality, truly creative literature, not from ordinary, conventionalized usage. But, as was suggested above, that is how metaphors start, as creative language use, and not as copies thereof:

(5) a. And the train which had picked them at sunrise out of a waste of glaciers and hotels was waltzing at sunset round the walls of Verona.

(E.M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*)

b. At least let my delusions be allowed to fool me,
so that I will forget how my soul is empty.

(K. Kaváfis, September 1903)

c. Sweet love, renew thy force; be it not said
Thy edge should blunter be than appetite, ...

(Shakespeare, *Sonnet 56*)

Implicit metaphors like (5a-c) have in common that they are instances of category mistake. The predicate *waltz* in (5a) requires, as a preliminary condition, that the entity said to be waltzing be an animate being capable of dance. Clearly, trains do not satisfy that condition, but Forster, by saying that the train was waltzing, forces his reader to consider this train, for the purpose of the story, as an animate being capable of dance. A reader who follows his lead will then picture the rhythmic rumbling of the train as a dance, which is precisely the force of the metaphor. Had Forster written about a train that was cycling or galloping or crawling round the walls of Verona, either no metaphor or a different one would have arisen.

In like manner, the predicate *empty* in (5b) requires a container-like object as the entity referred to by the subject term. But in this sentence, the subject term refers to the writer's soul (or to his life, in the Greek original), which is not literally a container. To picture it as one, however, has a certain evocative power, which makes the metaphor effective. The same mechanism is at work in (5c), where Shakespeare applies the predicate *blunt*, which is specifically restricted to cutting instruments, to feelings of love, as well as to the sensation of appetite, thereby comparing both implicitly to a knife or sword.

We thus regard implicit metaphor as an instance of category mistake, which becomes effective only if the implicit comparison has sufficient evocative power. This latter condition is a matter of psychology and well outside the semanticist's province. But the fact that we can treat category mistakes, and thus implicit metaphors, in the context of presupposition theory gives the study of (implicit) metaphor a clearly defined place in semantic theory, which may be a step forward in the direction of a fuller understanding of the phenomena concerned.

Lakoff & Johnson have called attention to the fact that metaphoric usage can spread and become conventionalized, in which case the usage is codified in the lexicon of the language. We have now seen something of the underlying mechanism for processes of this kind. The word *obvious*, for example, was originally used for anything that is 'in the way' so that it can't be missed along a road, either as an obstacle or as a sign or meeting point. When it began to be applied to insights, ideas, answers, problems and the like, listeners were forced to regard processes of thought as journeys, with a beginning and an end and clearly visible signs or obstacles in the way. The comparison of thought processes to a journey then became an easy source for further, less original, metaphors, which became conventionalized even more quickly.

Along with other forms of creative language use, metaphor is thus seen to be a powerful source of new lexical items where they are needed. It is hardly speculative to surmise that this is how 'primitive' vocabularies of simple societies, where linguistic needs were largely limited to concrete everyday business around the house, the land and the clan, and perhaps also to the recounting of memories, were expanded to cater for the needs of more advanced societies that began to organize states and to cultivate the arts and sciences. It would be a worthwhile exercise to study the lexicons of the languages of present-day highly developed societies from this anthropological point of view. The results of such a study might yield important insights into the workings of the mind.

As a final point, suggested by questions posed by Robyn Carston and Paul Dekker, it may be added that implicit metaphors apparently show some peculiarities under negation and other operators. Sentences like the following are distinctly odd:

- (6) a. The train did not waltz at sunset round the walls of Verona.
 b. Why did the train waltz at sunset round the walls of Verona?

I have no answer to the question of why sentences like (6a,b) should be odd, or if they deny or question the metaphor rather than the propositional content, but I am sure that a further investigation into this and similar matters will reveal interesting new insights into the nature both of implicit metaphors and of the use of negation and other operators.

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