

THE STRUCTURE OF METAPHOR TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Dorota RYBARKIEWICZ

Abstract

In the paper I try to sketch the pragmatic centrality of the three Aristotle's properties for bridging the gap between the obscurity and comprehensibility of metaphors.

Metaphor remains a vague term. But I hope that, contrary to Goodman's words, "making the obscure obvious" is not likely to result in dull banality¹.

For the sake of simplicity, the limitation to linguistic metaphors containing no extralinguistic signs is essential. Therefore no visual nor film metaphors are taken into consideration although, as it seems, their analysis may be carried out along much the same lines.

I think that the whole problem of determining metaphor may be reduced to the pragmatic criteria which overlie the structure of metaphor. In the first part, the analysis follows Black's distinction between two elements forming a metaphorical expression:

α - element used metaphorically. Simple or complex expression may play this role. Black calls it *focus*.

\underline{b} - element used literally. Again it may consist of one or more expressions. In Black's terminology - *frame*².

In the examples, both elements are specified in the following way:

¹ "Any effort in philosophy to make the obscure obvious is likely to be unappealing, for the penalty of failure is confusion while the reward of success is banality. An answer, once found, is dull; and the only remaining interest lies in a further effort to render equally dull what is still obscure enough to be intriguing." (p. XV).

² I use symbols to avoid possible misunderstanding connected with Black's nomenclature.

α (**bold**), b (underlined)

- 1) Wind **tears itself ghostly** in the eaves of ruins.
- 2) Wind's **frayed wings curved on** the ruins.
- 3) **Shipwreck of grass**; or shipwreck of grass

In the first two metaphors both elements are immediately recognised. Underlined expressions are used literally and belong to the b-type. Without any effort we can identify α . The third example is undoubtedly a metaphor but this fact is not sufficient to determine exactly the role of every word used in it. Namely, it is not possible to tell, without a broader context, which expression is α and which is b. It is also worth noticing that 1) and 2) are *fork metaphors* since their α elements are compound. They can be viewed as two metaphors combined by common b setting. But each of them has different structure: 1) represents *mixed* metaphors since *tears itself* in no way goes with *ghostly*; while 2) is an example of *consistent* metaphor - *frayed* and *curved* may refer to *wings*. Speaking in terms of cognitive science, α expressions of a consistent metaphor belong to the same concept network and, in the case of mixed one, to two or more different concept networks [6].

Let us emphasise that both α and b are indispensable elements of any metaphor. The conjecture that a metaphor may be a single expression seems implausible since nobody is able to decide whether a word totally deprived of any linguistic and/or situational context is a metaphor or not.

The foregoing remark, however, cannot claim to be exhaustive since in everyday use of language, governed by the principle of economy, we often come across the examples of one-word metaphoric utterances. Let us remember, however, that they are always imbedded in a whole conversational and situational context. That is why, in practice, the interlocutors may immediately reconstruct the whole proposition intended by the speaker. For instance, in a friendly talk about holidays at the seaside one party may say: "Hell". The complete, reconstructed metaphorical expression would be: "My holidays at the seaside were hell." To render such reconstruction process let us adopt a pragmatic

Rule of Reconstruction:

(RR) If an expression occurring in an utterance is of α type, and the utterance does not include the b type of expression, then the missing b may be verbalised and added to α thus forming a complete metaphorical expression.

Let us call such a single α the tip of an *immersed metaphor*. Obviously the tip of an immersed metaphor visible at the surface of language may be only an α type of expression.

My main assumption is that the two elements, α and \underline{b} , constitute the first layer of the metaphoric structure. To proceed further in its description, we should focus upon the properties of metaphor. The properties of metaphor have been introduced in [11] where they served to compare some concepts of metaphor. Here I shall appeal to the same Aristotle's notions:

- transposition,
- transformation,
- resemblance³.

Let us remind that, by their means, there can be provided a succinct description of metaphor: The \underline{b} type of words (underlined in the examples) do not appear in their usual context. They have been transposed. Their non-standard occurrence causes the transformation of their meaning which, however, is not arbitrary but results from the relation of resemblance.

Now I would like to say something more about each of the three properties.

1. Transposition

Transposition characterises the relation occurring between the two elements of a metaphorical expression, α and \underline{b} . Further specification of this relation requires the introduction of standard and non-standard concatenations of linguistic expressions.

Standard concatenation occurs when the expressions are combined according to the syntactic and semantic rules of a given language. The latter rules may be treated as a list of collocations comprising all meanings of words.

Non-standard concatenation complies with the syntactic rules but violates the semantic ones. One of the concatenating elements appears beyond its customary context of use, it is thus transposed and referred to as an α . *De facto*, as the above examples of metaphor show, α does not have to be one-word expression, it may be a complex expression or even a text. However, in order not to complicate the matter any further, all α 's considered in the sequel are single.

³ Here I prefer to use the term "resemblance" instead of "similarity" to avoid the direct association with symmetry.

Here an interesting observation can be made: the probability of an expression to be α and to form a metaphor is in the inverse proportion to the number of its standard concatenations, which to some extent explains why such words as *something* or *to do* rarely, if ever, appear in metaphors.⁴

At this point it may be worthwhile to mention the general difficulty connected with the adequate formulation of the semantic rules. They may be explained by means of conceptual frames, as done in [12], or a detailed list of collocations. In spite of a great complexity, such a system of rules does not guarantee the correct classification of all expressions. Natural language cannot be frozen once for ever - it is constantly changing and absorbing novel metaphors whose meaning gains in stability, to become completely fixed in the end., e.g., *to start the engine*, *to raise objections*. It is not clear how to label such expressions at various stages of their absorption process. Therefore it is possible that by semantic rules alone an expression would be a metaphor, whereas for language users it would be legitimately called literal as its meaning has been already extended and comprehension is automatic. Of course, we may unrealistically assume that the list of collocations is being continuously updated.

On the other hand, also some rigid criteria of literalicity can be proposed (see, for example, [8]), namely, those reducing the literal language solely to the utterances directly referred to sensory data. Then, even a sentence *This car horned at me* is classified as metaphorical - literally cars have no pointed growth on the top of their heads. From a genetic point of view, this approach is undoubtedly justified: the role of metaphors in the history of language is indisputable (sound-making apparatus were originally horn shaped). However, the metaphorical status of an expression should not be linked with its origin. I believe the synchronic line is the right one to take in the investigation of metaphor.

Having now specified the property of transposition, we may try to explain the difference between metaphor and nonsense (fig. 1). The threshold between them is marked syntactically and not semantically. Only getting in the way of the syntactic rules puts an utterance on the side of nonsense and makes it unworthy of the effort of interpretation. Accordingly, *Sleep tomorrow thin on belong without* is a nonsense and *The green government firmly stands on an exhausted boat of dreams* is not, despite its apparent vacuity. Therefore the term "semantical nonsense" may be replaced with "potential metaphor".

⁴ It seems that the same words possess vast semantic fields, see [9].

The line separating syntactical and semantical nonsenses seems to be stable and precisely fixed by the rules of language. Less firm boundaries run across the scope of syntactically correct expressions. One separates the already-interpreted expressions from still-not-interpreted ones, i. e. potential metaphors. Its existence results from the lack of invention, time and memory on the part of language users who have not enough fantasy to build outstanding but syntactically correct expressions, have no time to think out a putative interpretation for them and do not feel like burdening their memory unless it is absolutely necessary. Beardsley [1] refers to the situation saying that such expressions (semantical nonsenses) may become possible only in an unexpected context. Another boundary is connected with alive (fresh) and dead (frozen) metaphors and, as it can be easily noticed, is flexible and time dependent.

C O M P O U N D E X P R E S S I O N S

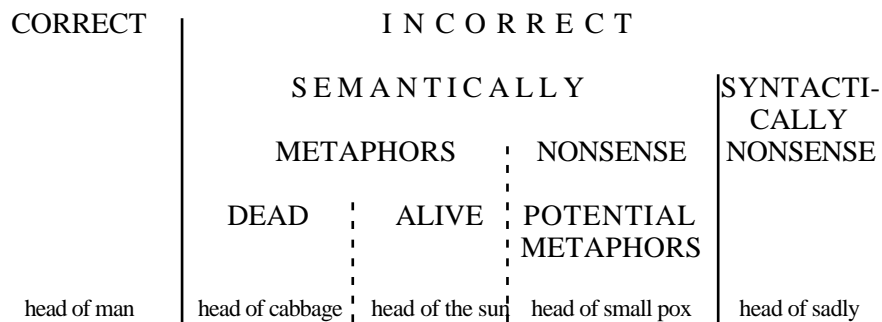


fig. 1

Incidentally, we may mention the left-hand border, which separates metaphors from the literal, semantically correct expressions. This line is also changeable in time and different for various speakers. The history of language shows that some attractive metaphors become frequent and thus the scope of α meaning is extended (as in the example *The car horned at me*). In this way the property of transposition wanes and language users gradually lose the feeling of strange setting of a word since they are able to understand it immediately and in one commonly accepted and correct way. Every natural language abounds in this kind of ex-metaphors. Such extinction of metaphors is both an individual process when one language user is being acquainted with a metaphor to the

point it functions like a literal expression, or a group process when the whole language community becomes acquainted with it till it is well known for hundred percent of its speakers.

Here it may be not amiss to look at the property of transposition in the context of the logical values and Grice's conversational maxims. Very often transposition is the obvious cause of falsity of metaphorical statement. For this reason some authors tended to determine metaphor in terms of its falsity. Also in Grice terminology metaphors violate the Maxim of Quality: *Speak the truth!* Apparent falsity of most metaphorical sentences seemed to justify this view. However, the existence of true metaphorical and false non-metaphorical sentences as well as the fact that a negated metaphor remains a metaphor (for example, *I am a parrot. I'm not a parrot*), does not allow to adhere to this account. Actually, the truth value criteria are not sufficient to distinguish metaphors from other types of statements (like irony).

The property of transposition is entirely pragmatic. It is important to reiterate that a transposed expression is put in a completely novel setting and beyond its normal context of use. Obviously this stands in conflict with the standard norms of meaning and usage, which is immediately noticed by an average speaker. In terms of conversational principles, the transposition (as being related to the language users) involves or is the result of - depending on the point of view - the violation of the so-called Principle of Relevance which in the shortest version states:

(PR) What you say should be relevant!

Moreover, the pragmatic character of a metaphor shows itself in many other respects:

- transposition is a method to create a metaphor;
- for the audience it is a signal of non-standard use of language;
- transposed element α conveys the information about the direction that should be followed in order to find the interpretation of a metaphoric expression;
- transposition is brought about by a non-standard setting of words, which implies the existence of standard use, which in turn cannot be determined without the appeal to the intuition of language users. It may be assumed that for every communication system there is an ideal group of standard speakers and only its members draw the borderline between a semantical nonsense and a metaphor, and between dead and alive metaphors;

- another concept closely connected with transposition is strangeness. Again its clarification requires language users: something is always strange to somebody;

The feature of transposition seems to be present in visual metaphors. In spite of different basic terminology the main intuition seems to be preserved: “visual metaphors identify or link disparate categories by means of homospatiality that are not physically compatible in the sorts of entities they propose” (see [3], p. 198).

2. Transformation

With this background, we now may come to the second property, the transformation. The transformation can be brought to light by analogy between metaphors and “illusion figures”. The figures are used ordinarily to show how our image may be distorted in certain circumstances. For example, in the well known figure shown below, for most people one of the horizontal lines is longer even though both are the same length. Obviously, the presence of the diagonal lines causes the confusion.

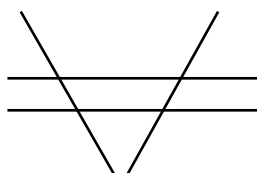


fig. 2

Similar distortion is present in a metaphor: α may play the role of the two parallel lines interpreted in a new way when affected by the background. Here appears one more feature in common: dependence on the interpreter.⁵ In the case of metaphor, the change of α meaning is closely connected with the culture, individual experience of the speaker but also with some less clear factors. For instance, *She is the only strawberry on my field* could be considered to be a complement. But attaching different, negative meaning to it cannot be excluded, especially by

⁵ People who always live in a natural surrounding without straight lines of roads and buildings can judge properly the length of the parallel lines in the figure. Here the powerful influence of experience on the perception is especially visible.

those who suffered after eating the fruit. As the tests have revealed, (see [9]) some speakers do not realise that the connotations they link with a word are exceptional and so are their interpretations of a metaphor.

We cannot talk about some special kind of transformation with respect to metaphors without determining the object really changed: the meaning. It seems promising to characterise it by means of the concept of bunch of properties. I assume the properties corresponding to the expression to be at least partially ordered in importance. We need such an assumption to explain why in metaphors there is a choice of different interpretations: manifold metaphorical and (usually) one literal. To render the hierarchy of properties let us borrow from Frege the terms of sense and colour. *Sense* is characterised as: an information expressed, something we understand in a given language when we know it. Sense is connected with the speaker's ability to identify objects referred to by the expression: it comprises a way and context of presenting things. Moreover, sense is indispensable to deduce what a sentence implies. As such, sense is intersubjective: the information conveyed by linguistic expressions should be equally accessible to all the language users. Basing on the above intuitions I propose to approach the sense as a set of properties. For example, the sense of *to kneel* may be determined as: {to rest on knees, to be bent, to overweigh one's knees,...}.

The latter component of meaning, *colour*, is only mentioned by Frege. This factor is connected with feelings and impressions which obviously are distinct for every speaker. And thus colour is subjective and rather psychological. (Therefore, according to Frege, it should be eliminated from the logical thought.) We may say that the difference in colour is the difference in connotations. And just those connotations turn out to be essential in the metaphorical communication. For example, the colour of *to kneel* may be: {to have characteristic shape of body, to pray, to be humble, ache in one's back, chill of the church floor,...}- at least some of them necessary to interpret a metaphor. The borderline between sense and colour is not clear-cut. Some of the properties dominate in everyday speech, the others being hidden and not realised. Thus it can be stated that the standard contexts reveal the properties that belong to the sense, whereas the non-standard ones - transposition - elucidate the colour, as the following examples show:

- a) *The woman is kneeling.*
- b) *A caterpillar is kneeling.*

The eminent property in a) is dictionary: "to remain on knees"; in b) much more elusive - "to have J-shape of body". Therefore, the metaphorical transformation results from the re-ordering of the hierarchy of

properties corresponding to α : some of the colour properties start to prevail.

3. Resemblance

The transformation consisting in the above switch has strong impact upon the denotative function of metaphor, namely, it is suspended, see for instance, *kneel* from b) which no longer refers to a man nor any creature possessing knees. There appears a denotative gap which must be filled in by speakers. Their task is to solve the problem: What is the reference of the metaphor? The process of answering that question is sometimes easy and immediate, like in b), but not always it is so obvious. This sense of lack of obviousness depends very much on the structure of metaphor and, more precisely, on one of its elements remaining tacit. And that is where another layer of metaphorical structure emerges, the layer being strictly connected with the cognitive process leading to the solution of the metaphorical puzzle. I think that this layer is composed of two elements, sometimes referred to as: source and target (terminology from [7]). In most general terms:

Target is something to which a metaphor refers; an object described by it.

Source is something that describes target, “a piece of glass through which the target is to be perceived”.

Target and source are distinguished functionally and, therefore, here I make no substantial claims about their ontological nature. By their means it can be determined when filling the semantical gap is automatic and when it is not. They provide certain account of the very process of deciphering the meaning of a metaphor, otherwise impossible. In everyday communication we keep coming across metaphors wherein both couples of the distinguished elements do correspond, and so α corresponds to the source and β to the target, for instance,

1. *crying trees*
shipwreck of grass
wind tears itself

On the other hand, in other quite numerous metaphors the target falls beyond the metaphorical expression, as in:

2. *the root of friendship.*
shipwreck of grass.
wind's frayed wings.

At this moment we are able to render the concepts of vertical and horizontal metaphors introduced in [11] more precise:

1. Metaphor's structure is *vertical* if α corresponds to the source and \underline{b} to the target.

$$\begin{array}{ll} \alpha & \text{source} \\ + & \\ \underline{b} & \text{target} \end{array}$$

2. Metaphorical structure is *horizontal* if α and \underline{b} both correspond to the source and the target remains unknown.

$$\begin{array}{ll} \alpha + \underline{b} & \text{source} \\ ? & \\ & \text{target} \end{array}$$

In order to understand horizontal metaphors, the speaker does not have to find a name for it. In many cases, as in *the wind's frayed wings*, it is even impossible since adequate words in the language are lacking. No wonder they are the most innovative and creative type of metaphors and the only means to restructure our perception and to enrich the language.

Horizontal metaphors, posing the question about the target, require a problem solving technique on the part of the speaker and challenge his knowledge, imagination and his thinking abilities. In this respect, vertical metaphors are less demanding but also imply some creative effort connected with another question: In what way does the source resemble the target? Although creativity has a bearing on the outcome, the results of these efforts are not reducible to the speakers arbitrary choices which lie beyond inquiry. The crucial concept which is likely to bring us sharper and more explicit confrontation with the above two questions is resemblance. Resemblance is the object of investigation for a speaker attempting to elaborate the meaning of a metaphor. With this aim he compares the source with the target: in case of horizontal metaphors, a supposed-to-be target. What is the probable universe of resemblance relation? I claim that what the speakers compare are the bundles of properties, as the illustration below shows:

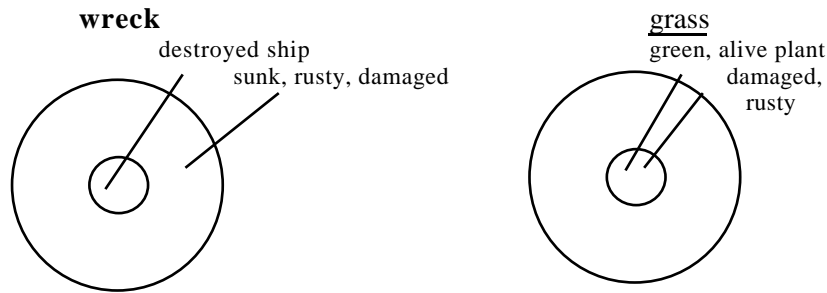


fig. 3

Therefore, it has become manifest that the source and the target may be identified with the properties. Here transformation and resemblance meet.

At present, let us emphasise the fact that metaphorical resemblance resorts to the act of comparing and for this reason it mirrors its typically pragmatic features. I therefore propose to reformulate the notion of a resemblance along the following lines:

1. Unlike the standard similarity, it is not a connected relation. The language users, inevitably, are not capable of noticing the resemblance between any two potential sources and targets. In result they cannot dispose of the whole variety of unconstrued potential metaphors the existence of which prove the above statement.

2. Resemblance is irreflexive. Ordinarily, the speakers do not compare the same bundles of properties as it is thoroughly void and, at best, results in a trivial implicature. See, for example,

a) *Radio is a radio.*

Notwithstanding, similarly built sentences may be found among metaphors.

b) *In his childhood, Einstein was not an Einstein.*

c) *The woman is a woman.*

Albeit the same word plays the role of α and \underline{b} , in every occurrence it has different meaning. Setting identical words twice in such a statement evidently goes against the Principle of Relevance (connected with the transposition) and leads to the transformation of meaning with its change in the hierarchy of properties and, further, to generating the metaphorical meaning. I think that this type of metaphors, let us call them *mirror metaphors*, make us realise the importance of the hierarchical order of properties in sets linked by the resemblance relation.

This factor being ignored, all the sentences similar to a) would have to be taken for metaphors, which is not the case. Finally let us remark that all mirror metaphors are vertical.

Resemblance is asymmetric. This feature is strictly connected with the transformation and the difference of the hierarchies of properties: The following illustration may elucidate the asymmetry:

a) *His dog is a donkey* (possible common property: stubborn, stupid).

b) *His donkey is a dog.* (possible common properties: friendly, attached)

Additionally, in horizontal metaphors the most basic asymmetry results from the fact that the target is a searched element and the speaker must always proceed in one direction from the known source to the unknown target.

Conclusion

I have attempted to account for the comprehension of metaphors in terms of their structure. The ground for a metaphor have been formulated as two relations: of non-standard concatenation linking (at least) two linguistic expressions then called α and \underline{b} ; and resemblance between (again at least) two sets of hierarchically ordered properties, the source and the target. These both levels are interconnected in two ways, horizontal or vertical. This division has some implications for the process of interpreting metaphors and their typology that shall be considered elsewhere.

University of Łódź, dorotar@kryisia.uni.lodz.pl

REFERENCES

- [1] BEARDSLEY, M. C., "The Metaphorical Twist", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 22, 1962, pp. 293-307.
- [2] BLACK, M., "Metaphor", *Models and Metaphors*, ed. Ortony, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1962, pp. 25-48.
- [3] CARROLL, N., "Visual Metaphors", *Aspects of Metaphor*, ed. Hintikka, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994, pp. 189-218.
- [4] GOODMAN, N., *The Structure of Appearance*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mas., 1951.

- [5] GRICE, H. P., "Logic and Conversation", *Syntax and Semantics: Speech Acts*, ed. Cole, Morgan, New York Academic Press, 1975, vol 3.
- [6] INDURHYA, B., "Constrained Semantic Transference: A Formal Theory of Metaphors", *Synthese*, 68, 1986, pp. 515-552.
- [7] INDURKHYA, B., "Metaphor as a Change of Representation: An Interaction Theory of Cognition and Metaphor", *Aspects of Metaphor*, ed. Hintikka, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994, pp. 95-150.
- [8] LAKOFF, G. & JOHNSON, M., *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [9] MARGALIT A. & GOLDBLUM. N, "A Metaphor Game", *Synthese*, 104, No2, 1995, pp. 299-323.
- [10] MOOIJ, J.J.A., *A Study of Metaphor*, Amsterdam, North Holland, 1976.
- [11] RYBARKIEWICZ, D., "Three Aspects of Metaphor", *Logica Trianguli*, 1, 1997, pp. 93-103.
- [12] STEINHART, H. & KITTAY, E., "Generating Metaphors from Networks: A Formal Interpretation of the Semantic Field Theory of Metaphor", *Aspects of Metaphor*, ed. Hintikka, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994, pp. 41-94.