

THE SEMANTICS OF METAPHOR

Metaphor as a feature of sentence readings

Professor Sadock's position is that metaphor is not a linguistic problem at all, because the mechanisms underlying metaphor exist independently of language. The use of "a lion on a warrior's shield," he says, manifests "the same analogical urge that functions in the issuance and apprehension of verbal metaphors." But it is vital here to distinguish metaphor, on the one hand, from similes and other nonmetaphorical analogies, on the other. There is certainly no special linguistic problem about such explicitly figurative sentences as (1) or (2):

(1) He is as brave as a lion.

(2) He is like a father to her.

The linguistic problem arises instead because of implicit figuration, as in (3) or (4):

(3) He is a lion in battle.

(4) The child is father to the man.

The problem is to explain how such sentences can have the meaning they do, when they are false or nonsensical if taken literally. In other words, the analogical urge operates sometimes in literal speech, sometimes in metaphorical. It can produce both and so cannot explain the difference between the two.

My own position, as against Sadock's, is that the fundamental problem about metaphor is a problem for our theory of *langue*, not for our

theory of *parole*. But I speak here only about metaphor, and not about other figures such as irony, litotes, allegory, or simile.

Various considerations operate in favour of this position, although they neither severally nor jointly entail it.

First, if the synchronic description of a language takes no account of metaphor, it provides an inadequate basis for diachronic explanations of semantic innovation. Language is full of dead metaphors like "inflamed passion," "feeble argument", or "rain of blows": How have they got there?

Again, it is clearly characteristic of certain categories of artificial languages that they must lack any possibility of metaphor. Programming languages for computers, like Fortran, or interpreted formal systems, like Carnap's, would be very seriously flawed in the performance of the tasks for which they are severally designed if they allowed their component words or symbols to be attributed new and unstipulated meanings in certain contexts. It is arguable, therefore, that we radically blur the difference between these kinds of artificial languages on the one side, and ordinary natural languages, like English (or artificial languages for everyday use, like Esperanto), on the other, if we do not allow essentially for the possibility of metaphor in our analysis of the latter. For example, it is characteristic of a natural language sentence like (5)

(5) He is a lion

that it is indefinitely rich in possible meaning. Alongside one or more literal readings it admits also an indefinite variety of metaphorical ones. A theory that does not allow this will never satisfy the intuitions of people who are expert in the use of language, like the best creative writers. (The French classical tradition was an exception, but a self-conscious and theoretically motivated one.)

Thirdly, metaphor cannot be explained within a theory of speech acts, because a supposed speech act of metaphorizing would differ from standard types of speech act in an important respect. If Tom utters the sentence

(6) I am sorry,

he may well be apologizing. But, if I utter the sentence

(7) Tom said that he was sorry,

I am not apologizing myself; I am just reporting Tom's apology. The original speech act is overridden by the passage from *oratio recta* to *oratio obliqua*. Now metaphor behaves quite differently. When Tom describes his friend by saying

(8) The boy next door is a ball of fire,

Tom's description can be fully understood only by someone who understands the metaphor. But equally, if I myself report later

(9) Tom said that the boy next door is a ball of fire,

my report of Tom's utterance can also be fully understood only by someone who understands the metaphor. The metaphor is not overridden by the passage from *oratio recta* to *oratio obliqua*: the *oratio obliqua* sentence contains the same element of metaphorical meaning that the *oratio recta* contained. Arguably, therefore, metaphorical meaning inheres in sentences, not just in speech acts. We should be perfectly happy to say here, "What Tom said is true," not just, "What Tom meant is true."

This point is a very serious difficulty for anyone, like Searle (cf. his paper in the present volume) who wants to construe metaphor solely in terms of speaker's meaning – the meaning of the utterance rather than of the sentence uttered. The metaphoricalness, or special character, of (8) is preserved under transformation into indirect discourse: the apology-making character of (6) is not. Why is this? The simplest explanation seems to be that metaphoricalness is a property of sentences. Those, like Searle, who wish to reject such an explanation bear the onus of presenting a convincing alternative one. Otherwise their theory limps.

No doubt the linguistic context of utterance often fails to provide sufficient cues for us to disambiguate a metaphorical sentence. We must turn then to whatever features of the nonlinguistic setting are relevant. But just the same is true of nonmetaphorical sentences, as with the meaning of "unsatisfactory," say, in

(10) He's unsatisfactory.

It would be a mistake to suppose that this familiar component of communicational situations provides any special support for a speech-act theory of metaphor.

Fourthly, if our linguistic theory gives no account of metaphor, it may well make so much the poorer a contribution to the framework within which psycholinguistic investigations are carried on. Language-learning infants often speak in metaphors without knowing the literal meanings of the sentences they utter (Cohen and Margalit, 1972, p. 470).

But there is another reason why the stock attitude of linguistic theorists to metaphor is incorrect; and this reason is an intrinsically stronger one, because it looks inwardly to the structure of synchronic semantics, rather than outwardly to the use of semantic analyses in etymological explanations, in comparisons between natural and artificial languages, in

speech-act theory, or in psychological inquiry. I have in mind a certain choice that exists in the methodology of natural language semantics, which I shall refer to as the choice between the method of cancellation and the method of multiplication. This choice arises in relation to quite a range of other problems besides that of metaphor; and my argument will be that whatever choice of method is made to deal with metaphor both reinforces, and is reinforced by, the choice of the same method in the other cases. In particular, if we need to introduce the method of cancellation into our semantics in order to deal with certain kinds of nonmetaphorical sentences, we might just as well exploit its potential for the analysis of metaphor.

Let us turn briefly from metaphor to examine these other, non-metaphorical cases. Consider the differences between

(11) It wasn't an insult because it was not intended as such

and

(12) It was an unintentional insult.

Clearly the word "insult" might be described by a compositional semantics as occurring in a sense that is +INTENTIONAL in (11), but not in (12). But such a description chooses what I have called the method of cancellation. It supposes that the occurrence of the adjective "unintentional" in (12) has cancelled the +INTENTIONAL feature in this occurrence of the word "insult," (because the retention of that feature would render the sentence self-contradictory). We need then, for the description of (11) and (12), just one lexical entry for "insult," alongside some general set of rules for semantic feature-cancellation in the process of composing sentential meaning. Correspondingly both (11) and (12) are unambiguous.

Alternatively, however, we could employ the method of multiplication. We could have two lexical entries: "insult₁" which is +INTENTIONAL, and "insult₂" which is -INTENTIONAL. We would then dispense here with the use of any rules for semantic cancellation, and both (11) and (12) would now be ambiguous. One of the two underlying sentences for (11) would have the same meaning as on our previous interpretation of (11), the other would be rather a non sequitur. Similarly, one of the two underlying sentences for (12) would be self-contradictory, the other would have the same meaning as our previous interpretation. But what is crucial here is that the alternative to the method of cancellation is a method that doubles the number of relevant lexical entries.

Perhaps I should add here that there is not a third - quasi-Gricean - possibility. It will not do to say that "insult" never has the feature

+INTENTIONAL, but carries with it, in normal contexts, a conversational implicature of intentionality, which happens to be cancelled in (12). The reason why this possibility is not available is because it cannot explain the force of the “because ...” clause in (11). (In regard to the logical particles of natural language, Grice’s theory of implicatures does afford an alternative approach to the method of cancellation, but arguably an inferior one. See Cohen, 1971; Cohen, 1977a¹.)

It would be easy to give many more examples of the issue about +INTENTIONAL, which is a particularly familiar hazard in the register of jurisprudence. But other kinds of example are also frequent. Consider

(13) I tried to warn him but he didn’t hear me

and

(14) I warned him, but he didn’t hear me.

The method of cancellation would describe the word “warn” as occurring in a sense that is +UPTAKE in (13) but not in (14). But the method of multiplication would generate two correspondingly different lexical entries for the word “warn.”

Another familiar feature in relation to which we are faced with a choice between the method of cancellation and the method of multiplication is the feature +ANIMATE. Consider the difference between

(15) A lion eats ten pounds of meat a day

and

(16) A stone lion needs no feeding.

According to the method of cancellation, the feature +ANIMATE is present in the occurrence of “lion” in (15), but is cancelled in (16): according to the method of multiplication the lexeme “lion₁” occurs in (15) and a different lexeme, “lion₂” occurs in (16). A vast number of analogous examples can be given, like “china dog,” “plastic flower,” and so on. The method of cancellation avoids the need to multiply lexical entries in order to deal with such phrases. But the method of multiplication promotes a second lexical entry, with the sense “replica of a lion,” “replica of a dog,” “replica of a flower.” Of course, one could hope to avoid cancelling or multiplying anything in relation to “lion” if one supposed that “stone” in (16) meant “stone replica of a” But the focus of methodological choice – choice between the method of cancellation and the method of multiplication – has now just shifted to “stone.” The contrast is now between the occurrence of “stone” in (16) and its occurrence in

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