

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN LINGUISTICS

Metonymy and Language

A New Theory of Linguistic Processing

Charles Denroche



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First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Denroche, Charles, 1956–

Metonymy and language : a new theory of linguistic processing /

By Charles Denroche.

p. cm. — (Routledge studies in linguistics; 14)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Metonyms. 2. Metaphor. 3. Figures of speech.
 4. Communications. 5. Computational linguistics. I. Title.
- P301.5.M49D46 2015
401'.43—dc23
2014032570

ISBN: 978-1-138-81062-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-74939-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Metonymy and Language

Metonymy and Language offers a radically new theory of language and communication in which metonymy and metonymic processing play a central role. It shows how the cognitive skill of recognizing relatedness between signs and parts of signs is indispensable in language use at all levels. It shows how theory across a whole range of linguistic phenomena can be reframed in terms of metonymic processing. This is developed into a General Theory of Metonymy. It is argued that metonymic competence explains language's great flexibility and fitness for purpose. It is shown that metonymic behaviour is often pursued for its own sake in recreational activities such as quizzes, puzzles and play. *Metonymy and Language* provides an invaluable survey of existing knowledge in the rapidly growing field of metonymy studies, while taking the concept of metonymy further than any scholar has to date. The monograph is based on rigorous primary research, using original data, and is the first to apply cognitive metonymy theory to the fields of text analysis, language learning and translation. It is argued that research with metonymy at its centre can provide a powerful tool for reframing and solving problems in diverse fields of human activity across the arts and sciences.

Charles Denroche lectures in Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at the University of Westminster, London. He studied at the universities of Oxford, Florence, Düsseldorf, London and Westminster. He has worked as a language teacher, translator and lexicographer.

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To SEW

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Typographical Conventions

The following conventions are used in this book for linguistic analysis:

<i>italics</i>	=	lexical item
'single inverted commas'	=	technical or coined term
"double inverted commas"	=	linguistic data
SMALL CAPS	=	semantic features and conceptual metaphors
<i>SMALL CAPS</i> (italics)	=	systematic metaphors

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to David Block, Graham Low and Steven Wootton for their invaluable assistance in developing the ideas in this book and helping to bring it into print. Also to my informants and to Margo Irvin and Katie Laurentiev at Routledge Research, New York.

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1 Introduction

This book is about metonymy. By 'metonymy' I mean the recognition of part-whole relatedness between things, words and concepts. The book derives from an overwhelming impression, gained over many years, both that metonymy plays a fundamental role in conceptualization and communication and that its role has not been fully recognized. This impression has come from everyday observations of naturally-occurring language but also from my experience as a language professional in the fields of language teaching, translation and lexicography. The book presents a General Theory of Metonymy, a theory which extends the notion of metonymy beyond the sphere in which it is normally considered to a more general application. In so doing, I demonstrate a commonality among a whole range of semiotic and linguistic phenomena which are normally seen as distinct.

This is not an exercise simply of renaming; it is more ambitious than that. It reveals that what at first appear to be diverse phenomena rely on a common basic and universal cognitive operation: the ability to recognize relatedness. Things, words and concepts are related if they have an element in common, if a part-whole relationship exists between them. The part may be a physical part or an attribute. It is the manipulation of these 'parts' which allows us to realize the full meaning-making potential of the lexicon and the fullest expression of our conceptual system. It is argued in this study that morphology, syntax, lexis and phraseology, as they are conventionally represented, account only for basic meaning making in language, and that it is metonymy—or better, 'metonymic processing'—which gives us the flexibility and subtleties on and above those systems, on which we constantly rely in our social dealings with others.

The starting point of the book was the observation that conventional metonymic expressions in English, such as *pay with plastic*, *the small screen*, *go for a bite*, *a roof over your head*, *bums on seats*, are common; it progressed by recognizing that metonymy does not just provide an alternative way of referring to things, but plays a role in giving nuance—*swingeing cuts* and *efficiency savings* refer to the same thing but highlight different aspects; it went on to the observation that metonymy operates at many different levels, from the sub-word level to the level of discourse, genre and intertext. Further, metonymy is not only prevalent but often salient in everyday communication, many interactions revolving

2 Introduction

around a metonymic component to the extent that the metonymic associations become what the interaction is 'about' rather than just a means to an end, the carrier of the message.

In order to confirm this hunch, I set myself the task of noting down examples of interactions in which metonymy played a central role to which I was party over a period of two days. Among them was a range of exchanges, some involving language, some not. Some interactions involved individual words or phrases, such as: discussing what *Sasha* was short for and why *Cantab* stands for Cambridge not Canterbury (the relation between short and long forms); solving 'quick' crosswords (the clues ask for synonyms); discussing the origin of the expressions *to be buff*, *buff up*, *to be in the buff* (the etymology takes us via a series of shifts back to *buffalo*); identifying someone at a party through a salient characteristic, eg *the woman wearing red boots*; observing an advertisement on the London underground with invented names for stations based on foods, eg *Oxtail Circus/Oxford Circus*, *Highbury & Biscuit Tin/Highbury and Islington*, the invented names and the real names being related in form; the use of salient personal characteristics of appearance when hailing someone, eg *Hey Fatso!*, *You, Michael Palin!* Other interactions involved metonymy as an organizing principle at the level of the whole discourse, for example being asked what my favourite scene was in a film (part for whole) and a TV reporter interviewing individuals in the crowd waiting for the New Year fireworks on the banks of the Thames (individual testimonies used to convey a general sense of what it was like to be there). Others were not verbal but involved similarities of other kinds: playing a card game where the aim is to end up with sets of related cards, either adjacent numbers in the same suit or the same number in different suits (cards in each set share characteristics); playing Sudoku (grids and lines of numbers are compared for similarities and differences); sorting out a spare room by ordering things by category (putting like with like); being told, when buying on Amazon, that "customers who bought this book also bought . . ." (similarities in past choices suggesting future preferences); remarking on the similarity between people you encounter and figures in the public eye (so-called 'lookalikes'). These are all activities in which the recognition of part-whole relationships plays a central role.

The methodology used in this book can broadly be described as 'reflective' or 'speculative'; some would characterize it as 'armchair linguistics'. This contrasts with what is typical for social-science research in that it does not contain rigorously collected and analyzed data or sections/chapters devoted to methods of data collection and analysis. The argument in this book is progressed in stages, the conclusion of one stage becoming the premise for the next. The purpose is to 'reconfigure' theory, that is, to make new connections across existing theoretical frameworks. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the methodology is solely in the nature of a theoretical investigation, as the argument is supported throughout by a substantial quantity of original data, either actively collected through small-scale studies, tasks and interviews or gained opportunistically from naturally-occurring sources. This sits well with

the tradition of scholars from various fields concerning language and communication, among whom I would include: theoretical linguists, such as Jakobson (1971), Saussure (1983) and Chomsky (1965); discourse analysts, such as Levinson (1983) and Coulthard (1985); functional grammarians, such as Halliday (1994); cognitive linguists, such as Lakoff (1987b); applied linguists, such as Widdowson (1983) and Cook (2000); and semioticians, such as Kress (2010). It is also the approach of scholars such as Bourdieu ('field' and 'habitus'), Bernstein ('elaborated code' and 'restricted code') and Giddens ('structuration' and 'modernity'); and, going back further in time, it characterizes the indirect or circumstantial evidence used by Charles Darwin to support his 'big idea' thesis, the theory of evolution through natural selection presented in *On the Origin of Species* (Dawkins 2010).

This book explores the following principal questions:

- What role does metonymy play in communication?
- What role does metonymy play in structuring discourse and text?
- What role does metonymy play in language-learner interaction?
- What role does metonymy play in translation?

To investigate these questions in a way different from the one proposed would run the risk both of arriving at misleading conclusions and being untrue to the intentions of the study. Metonymy occurs in a complex environment; it operates at many different levels, at once being the mechanism behind the scenes and the process in the foreground of the interaction. Attempting to isolate metonymy through statistical analysis is unlikely to be successful; it would be like investigating how the definite article is used in expressing gender roles by applying chi-square tests to rigorously sampled data—it is unlikely to be conclusive and could easily throw up 'phantom' results, as is seen in studies such as Cooper (1999) on processing idioms by L2 learners. There is a principle involved here which parallels Grice's maxim of 'quantity', whereby the chosen methodology needs to offer as much information as is needed and no more. For these reasons the empirical data in this volume are from a range of different sources: corpus data, lexicographic data, internet searches, contrastive studies across languages, news-reporting, texts from the press, political speeches, promotional material, packaging, television shows, literary texts, jokes and other forms of humour, semi-structured interviews, experiments with informants, data from translators, post-task interviews and invented examples. In addition to these, I make frequent use of the data I have collected over many years, noted down in numerous field data notebooks.

There are five primary data sets used in this work. They are: translations of common lexical items collected from student bilingual informants in 2008; family sayings and expressions collected from five informants in 2007; bilingual informants speaking monologues in two languages on 'social change over the last decade', recorded in 2006; data on 'speech slips' from my field notebooks, collected over a period of six weeks in 2008; and first drafts and final versions

of translations and retrospective interviews carried out by a trainee translator in London in 2009 and a professional translator in Germany in 2010.

This book is about metonymy and its importance in communication. But it does not start with metonymy. Preliminary chapters 'set the scene': Chapter 3 shows how metonymy is located within metaphor and Chapter 2 shows how metaphor is located within the overall picture of linguistic communication, frames of reference which need to be established before a discussion of metonymy can be attempted. An in-depth discussion of metonymy is found first in Chapter 4; the subsequent chapters then develop metonymic theory with regard to communication and its implications for text analysis, language learners and translators. What follows is a brief summary of the chapter contents.

Chapter 2, 'Modelling the Linguistic Mind', presents an original model of the linguistic mind. The purpose is to give an overview of linguistic phenomena essential in processing language and to identify where figurative language fits in. The model consists of six domains, comprising three stores and three skill centres. The stores, the Mental Lexicon, the Mental Phraseicon and the Mental Schema Store, are vast passive storehouses of information on lexis, phraseology and frames. These are acted on by the skill centres, the Grammar Processor, the Metaphor Processor and the Pragmatic Processor, which manipulate morphosyntax, metaphor and pragmatics, respectively. The model separates out phenomena which are confused in the literature and in so doing characterizes metaphor under three distinct headings, 'knowing metaphor', 'using metaphor', and 'doing metaphor'. These involve: information about systematic and conceptual metaphor, stored in the Mental Schema Store, such as *GOOD IS UP*, *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*; information about conventional metaphor, eg *couch potato*, *spill the beans*, in the Mental Phraseicon; and the ability to manage novel metaphor in the Metaphor Processor. These findings are situated within contemporary theories of intelligence and cognition. It is made clear that these domains are abilities and stores rather than discrete locations in the brain. The model is extended to the bilingual mind.

Chapter 3, 'The Ability to Metaphorize', investigates what is involved when understanding and generating novel metaphor and identifies three essential features: the involvement of two domains, directionality and selective transfer. I present an original model, the Stack of Counters model, to explain novel metaphor, in which semantic features, visualized as counters, are selectively manipulated. The model can be seen as a generative model, indicating that metaphor need not be considered anomalous and outside a generative description of language, as it is often portrayed, but instead sits comfortably within it. I go further and suggest that metaphor is the best proof we have that word meaning is stored as features, as no other phenomenon makes movements at feature level so evident. The model explains why processing metaphor is both predictable and involves little effort: it is predictable because the information is already in the 'stack' of features; and it is carried out with relative ease because the basic operation involved is the same one every individual carries out thousands of times a day. It also explains why language learners create novel metaphor with

little effort in a language they are not particularly proficient in: because they are applying a skill they use repeatedly in their first language. The literature on the discourse functions of metaphor is reviewed in this chapter and the information plotted against two axes: whether metaphor increases or reduces the specificity of the message, and whether metaphor is used more in transaction or interaction. The purpose of this is to show the diversity of the discourse functions of metaphor, to the extent that they often represent diametric opposites, demonstrating that the 'selection stage' is more fundamental than 'choice of domain' in metaphorizing.

Chapter 4, 'The Vital Role of Metonymy in Conceptualization and Communication', moves the narrative of the book to metonymy, demonstrating that metonymic processing is fundamental in many contexts—understanding word categories, when moving between sense and reference, when dealing with differences between competence and performance, in pragmatic inferencing and in the change of word meaning over time, to name some of them. This offers a perspective which reconfigures existing theory and shows a commonality across a spectrum of linguistic phenomena not normally considered together, a General Theory of Metonymy in communication. It is argued that language is by nature metonymic, as signs are partial and language under-refers, and that metonymic processing allows us both to deal with a system which under-refers and to exploit this phenomenon to our advantage. The language user is presented with a choice of strategies for naming entities. Original data from thirteen languages for the items *floating rib*, *rib cage*, *answering machine* and *mobile phone* are used to demonstrate how these choices become conventionalized. A more precise understanding of metonymy is developed in this chapter drawing on the vast and complex literature from cognitive linguistics in this area, focussing particularly on domain theory, the notion of the metonymy-metaphor continuum and metonymy typologies. It is argued that metonymic, literal and metaphoric language all involve the recognition of part-whole relations, the differences between them being the nature of the part-whole relation and the use to which it is put.

Chapter 5, 'Metonymy in Culture and Recreation', argues that metonymy not only offers alternatives when naming but also opportunities for expressing nuance, giving emphasis and creating 'spin'. It is argued that a model of communication which includes metonymy goes some way towards explaining how the language system permits the extraordinary subtleties of expression and nuance we are able to display. I demonstrate how a single lexical item often has three distinct senses, a metonymic, a literal and a metaphoric, each occupying a distinct semantic space and reinforced by local grammar. I call this the 'Triangle of Tropes'. The chapter gathers together evidence from a wide range of everyday texts and commonplace objects, demonstrating the unexpectedly wide range of cultural and recreational phenomena where metonymy and metonymic processing play a part, such as quiz shows, puzzles, games, humour, noticing lookalikes and using nicknames. I also interpret in-family expressions, the role of metonymy in avoiding cooperation and punning/wordplay, which I call 'Formal Metonymy', in terms of Metonymic Processing Theory.