

# The Rule of Metaphor

Multi-disciplinary studies  
of the creation of meaning  
in language

PAUL RICOEUR

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## Translator's introduction

This translation was done from the author's manuscript. It diverges at several points from the first edition of *La Métaphore vive* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1975), where errors have been found in that edition, and where Professor Ricoeur has undertaken revisions.

In general, I have attempted to translate as literally as possible, in order not to obscure precise points of interpretation, but on the contrary to facilitate the interdisciplinary communication that Paul Ricoeur promotes. So too, to assist further study by readers restricted to English, I have used readily available translations of works originally in other languages wherever I could.

There are, of course, several exceptions to the pattern of literal translation. One exception is the title of the book. Uncomfortable with the more literal translations of *La Métaphore vive* that came to mind, I have offered *The Rule of Metaphor* because of its metaphorical suggestiveness. The primary reference is to Aristotle's assertion, quoted often by Ricoeur,<sup>1</sup> that 'the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.' And besides rule as mastery of metaphor, the reader will encounter the language rules that impinge on metaphor, and the domains of discourse in which metaphor holds sway. Perhaps this phrase will disclose other meanings as well.

Since many readers of *The Rule of Metaphor* may be unfamiliar with the development of Ricoeur's work, a broader overview than the author's own introduction is reprinted below as an appendix (pages 315-22). Although this address was given in May 1971, it is still relevant as a general introduction to Ricoeur's current work.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it should be read with a few pointers in mind. First, etiquette demands that the many other authors to whom Ricoeur has turned appreciative and critical attention be

assured that his list of citations was shortened and focused by the nature of the address and its locale, the University of Chicago. Second, Ricoeur might well present his orientations and projects differently now from six years ago. Third, Ricoeur does not allude here to his interests in the social sciences and political philosophy, and in many social issues.<sup>3</sup>

When first discussing this project with me, Professor Ricoeur requested that the final product read more like his own work than like that of someone else. If that and any other worthwhile standards have been met, it is due to his own great co-operation in checking the translation and answering specific queries; to Kathleen McLaughlin, who assisted in this checking and undertook the first draft of the translation of Study 8; and to John Costello, SJ, who corrected the entire translation. Many friends helped on particular sections; Michael Czerny, SJ, Geoffrey Williams, SJ, and Peter McCormick deserve special mention.

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Besides the philosophical education it provided, I am thankful for the contribution of this experience to a coincident maturation over the past three years of my aesthetic and personal perspectives. The far greater debt, in all of this, is owed to my wife, Katharina.

Robert Czerny

Ottawa

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THE RULE OF METAPHOR





## Introduction

These eight Studies on metaphor grew out of a seminar course given at the University of Toronto in Autumn 1971, under the auspices of the Department of Comparative Literature. In this connection, I wish to express my very sincere thanks to Professor Cyrus Hamlin, who invited me to Toronto. These explorations progressed further during courses given subsequently at the University of Louvain, then at the University of Paris-X, within the framework of my Phenomenological Research Seminar, and finally at the University of Chicago, under the auspices of the John Nuveen professorship.

Each of these Studies develops one specific point of view and constitutes a complete whole. At the same time, each forms part of a unique path, which begins with classical rhetoric, passes through semiotics and semantics, and finally reaches hermeneutics. The progression from one discipline to the other corresponds to changes of the linguistic entity chosen for consideration: the word, the sentence, and then discourse.

The rhetoric of metaphor takes the *word* as its unit of reference. Metaphor, therefore, is classed among the single-word figures of speech and is defined as a trope of resemblance. As figure, metaphor constitutes a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words; its explanation is grounded in a theory of substitution.

The first two Studies correspond to this initial level. Study 1, 'Between Rhetoric and Poetics,' is devoted to Aristotle. It is he who actually defined metaphor for the entire subsequent history of Western thought, on the basis of a semantics that takes the word or the name as its basic unit. Furthermore, his analysis is situated at the crossroads of two disciplines - rhetoric and poetics - with distinct goals: 'persuasion' in oral discourse and the *mimêsis* of human action in tragic poetry. The meaning of this distinction is not developed until Study 7, where the heuristic function of poetic discourse is defined.

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Study 2, 'The Decline of Rhetoric: Tropology,' is devoted to the last works on rhetoric in Europe, particularly in France. The work of Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, serves as the basis for discussion. Two principal points are to be demonstrated here. I wish to show, first of all, that rhetoric terminates in classification and taxonomy, to the extent that it focuses on the figures of *deviation*, or tropes, in which the meaning of a word departs from its lexically codified usage. Secondly, I wish to show that while a taxonomic viewpoint is adequate for a static account of figures, it fails to explain the production of meaning as such, of which deviation at the level of the word is only the effect.

The semantic and the rhetorical viewpoints do not begin to be differentiated until metaphor is transferred into the framework of the *sentence* and is treated not as a case of *deviant denomination*, but as a case of *impertinent predication*. The next three Studies belong to this second level of consideration.

Study 3, 'Metaphor and the Semantics of Discourse,' contains the decisive step of the analysis; it can, therefore, be considered the 'key' Study. Here a theory of the statement-metaphor and a theory of the word-metaphor are set provisionally in radical opposition. The confrontation is prepared by distinguishing (in the manner of the French linguist Émile Benveniste) between a semantics, where the sentence is the carrier of the minimum complete meaning, and a semiotics, where the word is treated as a sign in the lexical code. Corresponding to this distinction between semantics and semiotics I propose a parallel opposition between a tension theory and a substitution theory. The former theory applies to the production of metaphor within the sentence taken as a whole, the latter concerns the meaning effect at the level of the isolated word. The important contributions of three English-language authors – I.A. Richards, Max Black, and Monroe Beardsley – are discussed within this framework. I try first to show that the seemingly disparate points of view represented by each of them ('philosophy of rhetoric,' 'logical grammar,' 'aesthetics') can be arrayed together under the aegis of the semantics of the sentence introduced at the beginning of the Study. I then endeavour to delimit the problem that these authors leave unsolved: that of the creation of meaning, for which newly invented metaphors are the evidence. This question of semantic innovation will animate Studies 6 and 7.

Measured against the question that emerges at the end of Study 3, the fourth and fifth Studies may appear to move backwards. But their essential aim is to integrate the semantics of the word, which the preceding Study seemed to have eliminated, with the semantics of the sentence. The definition of metaphor as transposition of the name is actually not wrong.

It allows metaphor to be identified and to be classed among the tropes. Above all, the traditional rhetorical definition cannot be eliminated because the word remains the carrier of the effect of metaphorical meaning. It should be remembered in this connection that, in discourse, it is the word that assumes the function of semantic identity: and it is this identity that metaphor modifies. What is vital, then, is to show how metaphor, which is produced at the level of the statement as a whole, 'focuses' on the word.

This demonstration is limited in Study 4, 'Metaphor and Semantics of the Word,' to works in the tradition of Saussurean linguistics, especially those of Stephen Ullmann. By stopping at the threshold of structuralism properly speaking, I show that a linguistics that does not distinguish between semantics of the word and semantics of the sentence cannot but assign the phenomena of meaning-change to the history of word usage.

The fifth Study, 'Metaphor and the New Rhetoric,' carries this same demonstration into the framework of French structuralism. This deserves a separate analysis inasmuch as it has produced a 'new rhetoric' that applies the rules of segmentation, identification, and combination to figures of speech, rules that already have been applied with success to phonological and lexical entities. The discussion is introduced by a detailed examination of the notions of 'deviation' and 'rhetoric degree zero,' by a comparison of the notions of 'figure' and 'deviation,' and then by an analysis of the concept of 'reduction of deviation.' This extended preparation prefaces the examination of neo-rhetoric properly speaking, where extremely careful consideration is given to its effort at reconstructing the set of figures systematically on the basis of the operations that govern the atoms of meaning at the infra-linguistic level. The essential aim of the demonstration is to establish that the undeniable subtlety of the new rhetoric is completely exhausted in a theoretical framework that overlooks the specificity of the statement-metaphor and limits itself to confirming the primacy of the word-metaphor. Nevertheless, I try to show that the new rhetoric hints from within its limits at a theory of statement-metaphor, which it cannot elaborate given the resources of its system of thought.

The transition from the semantic level to the hermeneutical level is provided by Study 6, 'The Work of Resemblance,' which takes up the problem left unresolved at the end of the third Study, that of semantic innovation or creation of a new semantic pertinence. The notion of resemblance is itself reintroduced for further examination in order to solve this problem.

The first step is to refute the view (which Roman Jakobson still holds) that the fate of resemblance is linked indissolubly to that of a substitution theory. I try to show that resemblance is no less required in a tension the-

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ory, for the semantic innovation through which a previously unnoticed 'proximity' of two ideas is perceived despite their logical distance must in fact be related to the work of resemblance. 'To metaphorize well,' said Aristotle, 'implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.' Thus, resemblance itself must be understood as a tension between identity and difference in the predicative operation set in motion by semantic innovation. This analysis of the work of resemblance suggests in turn that the notions of 'productive imagination' and 'iconic function' must be reinterpreted. Indeed, imagination must cease being seen as a function of the image, in the quasi-sensorial sense of the word; it consists rather in 'seeing as ...' according to a Wittgensteinian expression – a power that is an aspect of the properly semantic operation consisting in seeing the similar in the dissimilar.

The passage to the *hermeneutic* point of view corresponds to the change of level that moves from the sentence to discourse properly speaking (poem, narrative, essay, etc.). A new problematic emerges in connection with this point of view: the issue is no longer the *form* of metaphor as a word-focused figure of speech, nor even just the *sense* of metaphor as a founding of a new semantic pertinence, but the *reference* of the metaphorical statement as the power to 'redescribe' reality. The most fundamental support of this transition from semantics to hermeneutics is to be found in the connection in all discourse between sense, which is its internal organization, and reference, which is its power to refer to a reality outside of language. Accordingly, metaphor presents itself as a strategy of discourse that, while preserving and developing the creative power of language, preserves and develops the *heuristic* power wielded by *fiction*.

But the possibility that metaphorical discourse says something about reality collides with the apparent constitution of poetic discourse, which seems to be essentially non-referential and centred on itself. To this non-referential conception of poetic discourse I oppose the idea that the suspension of literal reference is the condition for the release of a power of second-degree reference, which is properly poetic reference. Thus, to use an expression borrowed from Jakobson, one must not speak only of split sense but of 'split reference' as well.

This theory of metaphoric reference is supported by a generalized theory of denotation close to that of Nelson Goodman in *Language of Art*; and I justify the concept of 'fictional redescription' by means of the kinship established by Max Black, in *Models and Metaphors*, between the functioning of metaphor in the arts and that of models in the sciences. This relationship on the heuristic level constitutes the principal argument of this hermeneutics of metaphor.

This brings the work to its most important theme, namely, that metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality. By linking fiction and redescription in this way, we restore the full depth of meaning to Aristotle's discovery in the *Poetics*, which was that the *poiêsis* of language arises out of the connection between *muthos* and *mimêsis*.

From this conjunction of fiction and redescription I conclude that the 'place' of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like.' If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally 'tensive' sense of the word 'truth.'

This incursion into the problematic of reality and truth demands that the philosophy implicit in the theory of metaphorical reference be elucidated. The eighth and last Study, 'Metaphor and Philosophical Discourse,' is a response to that demand.

This Study is essentially a plea for the plurality of modes of discourse and for the independence of philosophical discourse in relation to the propositions of sense and reference of poetic discourse. No philosophy proceeds directly from poetry: this is shown through what appears to be the most difficult case, that of Aristotelian and medieval analogy. Nor does any philosophy proceed indirectly from poetry, even under cover of the 'dead' metaphor in which the collusion between meta-physical and metaphorical, denounced by Heidegger, could take place. The discourse that attempts to *recover* the ontology implicit in the metaphorical statement is a different discourse. In this sense, to *ground* what was called metaphorical truth is also to *limit* poetic discourse. Poetic discourse is justified in this manner within its own circumscription.

This, then, is how the work unfolds. It does not seek to replace rhetoric with semantics and the latter with hermeneutics, and thus have one refute the other, but rather seeks to justify each approach within the limits of the corresponding discipline and to demonstrate the systematic continuity of viewpoints by following the progression from word to sentence and from sentence to discourse.

The book is relatively long because it takes pains to examine the methodologies proper to each point of view, to set out the detailed analyses belonging to each, and always to relate the limits of a theory to that of the corresponding point of view. In this connection, it will be noted that the book sets out and criticizes only those theories that at one and the same time carry a viewpoint to its highest degree of expression and contribute to the progress of the overall argument. Blistering refutations, then, will



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not be found here – at most, a demonstration of the unilateral character of doctrines that proclaim themselves to be exclusive. With respect to their origins, some of the decisive doctrines are taken from English-language literature and some from the French. This is an expression of the double allegiance of my research as well as my teaching in recent years; and I hope by this to help reduce the mutual ignorance that persists among specialists in these two linguistic and cultural worlds. I propose to rectify the injustice this seems to do to German-language authors in another book on which I am working currently, which takes up the problem of hermeneutics in its full scope.

These Studies are dedicated to several of those with whom I sense a philosophical affinity, or who have welcomed me in the universities where the Studies took shape: Vianney Décarie, université de Montréal; Gérard Genette, École pratique des hautes études à Paris; Cyrus Hamlin, University of Toronto; Émile Benveniste, Collège de France; A.-J. Greimas, École pratique des hautes études à Paris; Mikel Dufrenne, université de Paris; Mircea Eliade, University of Chicago; and Jean Ladrière, université de Louvain.



## STUDY 1

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# Between rhetoric and poetics: Aristotle

For Vianney Décarie

### 1 / RHETORIC AND POETICS

The historical paradox of the problem of metaphor is that it reaches us via a discipline that died towards the middle of the nineteenth century, when it ceased to be part of the collegial *cursus studiorum*. This link between metaphor and a dead discipline is a source of great perplexity: does not the return of contemporary thinkers to the problem of metaphor commit them to the hopeless project of resurrecting rhetoric from its ashes?

Assuming for the present that such an undertaking is not entirely in vain, it seems appropriate to begin with Aristotle, since he is the one who first conceptualized the field of rhetoric.

A reading of Aristotle tells us that we must begin cautiously. First of all, a simple examination of the table of contents of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* shows that we have received the theory of figures of speech from a discipline that is not merely defunct but amputated as well. For Aristotle, rhetoric covers three areas. A theory of argumentation (*inventio*, the 'invention' of arguments and proofs) constitutes the principal axis of rhetoric and at the same time provides the decisive link between rhetoric and demonstrative logic and therefore with philosophy (this theory of argumentation by itself takes up two thirds of the treatise). Rhetoric also encompasses a theory of style (*elocutio*) and, finally, a theory of composition (*compositio*).

Compared to this, what the latest treatises on rhetoric offer us is, in G. Genette's fitting words, a 'restricted rhetoric,'<sup>1</sup> restricted first to a theory of style and then to the theory of tropes. The history of rhetoric is an ironic tale of diminishing returns.\* This is one of the causes of the death

\* 'L'histoire de la rhétorique, c'est l'histoire de la peau de chagrin.' Ricoeur is referring to the leather talisman in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, which shrank each time it granted its possessor's wish. (Trans.)

of rhetoric: in reducing itself thus to one of its parts, rhetoric simultaneously lost the nexus that bound it through dialectic to philosophy; and once this link was lost, rhetoric became an erratic and futile discipline. Rhetoric died when the penchant for classifying figures of speech completely supplanted the philosophical sensibility that animated the vast empire of rhetoric, held its parts together, and tied the whole to the *organon* and to first philosophy.

This sense of irremediable loss increases all the more if we remember that the broad Aristotelian program itself represented the rationalization (if not reduction) of a discipline that in Syracuse, its birthplace, endeavoured to regulate all facets of public speech.<sup>2</sup> Because there was oratory [*éloquence*], public oratory, there was rhetoric. This remark implies a great deal. Originally, speech was a weapon, intended to influence people before the tribunal, in public assembly, or by eulogy and panegyric; a weapon called upon to gain victory in battles where the decision hung on the spoken word. Thus Nietzsche writes: 'Oratory is republican.' The old Sicilian definition 'Rhetoric is the master of persuasion' (*peithous dêmiurgos*)<sup>3</sup> reminds us that rhetoric was added to natural eloquence as a 'technique,' but that this technique is rooted in a spontaneous creativity. Throughout all the didactic treatises written in Sicily, then in Greece after Gorgias established himself in Athens, rhetoric was this *technê* that made discourse conscious of itself and made persuasion a distinct goal to be achieved by means of a specific strategy.

Thus, before taxonomy of figures of speech, there was Aristotle's far more embracing rhetoric; but even before the latter, there was undisciplined common speech [*l'usage sauvage de la parole*] and the wish to harness its dangerous power by means of a special technique. Aristotle's rhetoric is already a domesticated discipline, solidly bound to philosophy by the theory of argumentation, from which rhetoric, in its decline, severed itself.

Greek rhetoric did not just have a singularly larger program than modern rhetoric; from its relation to philosophy, it derived all the ambiguities of its position. The properly dramatic character of rhetorical activity is explained well by the 'savage' roots of rhetoric. The Aristotelian corpus presents us with just one possible equilibrium between such extreme tensions, an equilibrium that corresponds to the situation of a discipline that is no longer simply a weapon in the public arena but is not yet a mere botany of figures of speech.

Rhetoric is without doubt as old as philosophy; it is said that Empedocles 'invented' it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, rhetoric is philosophy's oldest enemy and its oldest ally. 'Its oldest enemy' because it is always possible for the art of 'saying it well' to lay aside all concern for 'speaking the truth.' The technique founded on knowledge of the factors that help to effect persuasion