

Metaphor and Metonymy: A Diachronic Approach

Kathryn Allan

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For Christian Kay

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INTRODUCTION

Metaphor studies have long been challenged by questions about the nature of metaphor, and even after many centuries of study there is surprisingly little consensus about what actually constitutes metaphor. Dictionary definitions of the term vary: the *Oxford English Dictionary* (in a revised third edition entry) defines metaphor as 'A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable'; the *American Heritage Dictionary* offers 'A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison'. Definitions like these rightly reflect widely held popular beliefs about metaphor, but they are less successful at addressing the kinds of issue that metaphor theorists have explored in the past three decades. Many traditional ideas about metaphor, like those represented in dictionaries, have been disputed or discredited within the discipline by recent research. Metaphor is no longer regarded as a figure of speech only, and has been shown to be common and pervasive; and theories that all metaphorical mappings are based on objective similarity or comparison have been rejected as inadequate or simply mistaken. At the same time, there is no general consensus among cognitive linguists about how to define metaphor, and the growth of research on metonymy and its relationship with metaphor has further complicated the issue. Recently, with the increasing interest in electronic corpora and artificial intelligence, there have been renewed efforts to find some reliable and workable procedure for identifying metaphor, and at the heart of this issue is the need to find a generally acceptable definition of metaphor.

One complication in the debate is the existence of metaphors regarded by many as conventionalised to the extent that they 'die' or cease to be metaphorical. Work in cognitive linguistics, concentrated on system-wide 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), has diverted much attention away from this issue by shifting focus to the cognitive mechanisms that underlie metaphorical mappings, but there is still some uneasiness about the difference between more and less 'active' metaphors. By taking a diachronic approach to metaphor and metonymy, I would contend that it is possible to sidestep these issues and adopt a pragmatic, data-centred stance. The analysis presented in this book is focused on the target concept INTELLIGENCE, and starts from an examination of the etymological development of a group of lexical items from Old English (OE) to Present

Day English (PDE), in order to identify earliest meanings and stages in semantic change; these are nouns and adjectives signifying either cleverness or stupidity which can be applied to people. I then go on to look at three of the most productive source concepts in more detail; these are the SENSES, ANIMALS and DENSITY. Each group raises particular questions about the way in which metaphor can be motivated, and how mappings between concepts develop. In the main part of the book I present detailed individual case studies centred on the linguistic data for these concepts.

1.1 MOTIVATION

The approach adopted in this study is influenced by the work of scholars including Sweetser (1990) and Kay (2000), and is not concerned with a narrow classification of what constitutes metaphor and metonymy so much as with an exploration of the kind of factors that can motivate mappings of various kinds. Within the cognitive linguistics tradition, motivation has been an important focus of study, and recent publications such as Cuyckens et al. (2003) and Radden & Panther (2004) have been devoted to the topic. This has led to more explicit interrogation of the term 'motivation' within this field. In the introduction to the latter volume, which includes several papers on metaphor and metonymy, Radden & Panther discuss some of the 'characterizations' of motivation as it has been understood by different scholars, and suggest:

In current functional and cognitive linguistics, the notion of motivation is understood in various ways, which are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive... each of the ... characterizations contains important elements: non-arbitrary relationships between form and meaning (as opposed to arbitrary relationships), iconicity (as one type of motivation), and explanation ('making sense' through motivation). These and other elements need to be integrated into a unified theory of motivation. (Radden & Panther 2004: 2)

It is perhaps the idea of explanation that is the most relevant to this study, and it is this aspect which is played up by Radden & Panther in the discussion following this extract; they go on to say that 'the notion of motivation is closely related to that of explanation' (p. 11). Their discussion echoes the earlier comments of Kövecses, who suggests that the terms 'explanation' and 'motivation' are 'roughly synonymous' (1995: 182).

Any explanation of how a linguistic expression arises must take account of a wide range of factors, both intra- and extralinguistic. Studies of motivation within cognitive linguistics typically concentrate on extralinguistic factors, and a major theme has been the consideration of the way in which thought is 'embodied'; a large number of metaphors and metonymies

seem to be motivated by everyday physical experience, and are common to unrelated languages for this reason. For example, the connection between vision and understanding (discussed in Chapter 2) that is evident in linguistic expressions such as *I see what you mean* can be explained by the importance of vision as a primary means of information about the world, and this is common to all humans. However, while embodied experience has been shown to be central to conceptualisation and in itself can explain the mappings between source and target in some linguistic expressions, the metaphorical and metonymical differences that are evident across languages show that other factors can also be involved. Many scholars (e.g. Geeraerts & Grondelaers 1995; Holland & Quinn 1987) have discussed the central role of culture in any account of conceptualisation, and have pointed out that it is not possible to fully explain many real examples in language without considering the cultural context in which these occur. The mappings that are explored in Chapter 4 testify to this: although animal metaphors are found in many (if not all) languages, the same animal can represent different human characteristics in different societies. This probably reflects the different cultural models and traditions that are part of the social-cultural belief systems of these societies. The fact that animal metaphors themselves are common to many languages shows that in reality cultural and cognitive factors in motivation often interact; and this is also demonstrated by the data discussed in Chapter 3. There appears to be a general connection between density and stupidity in English that depends on the idea of the MIND AS A PHYSICAL ENTITY, which can be found in any language and can be explained by common cognitive processes; however, in many expressions such as *thick as mince* particular substances represent density, and the selection of these substances is likely to be culturally informed.

A more detailed analysis of each of these mappings is presented in the main part of this book, drawing attention to a number of motivating factors that can be involved in metaphorical/metonymical mappings. As Radden & Panther's typology of motivation demonstrates, these can be diverse. They identify several types of language-independent motivation, including experiential, perceptual and cognitive motivation (using fairly specific definitions for each), but comment that as well as these 'a fully fledged theory of motivation would ... include cultural, social, psychological and anthropological factors as well as biological and neurological determinants' (2004: 31). Because of the enormous diversity of possible contributing factors posited by different scholars and the speculative nature of accounts of these factors, analyses of motivation have sometimes attracted criticism for their unscientific nature, but this kind of criticism perhaps mistakes the purpose of this type of work. Radden & Panther provide a helpful perspective on the value of studying motivation in the broadest sense:

We ... regard the search for motivational explanations as a useful heuristic for linguistic research ... for many linguistic phenomena motivational accounts suggest themselves strongly – not in the sense of nomological-deductive explanations in the ‘hard’ sciences, but more in the spirit of what the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey characterized as ‘understanding’ (*verstehen*) in the humanities or cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). (Radden & Panther 2004: 42)

The analyses presented here are very much in the same spirit. I do not intend to present a comprehensive, ‘scientific’ account of the motivation of a group of mappings; rather, I am interested in exploring the variety of both intra- and extralinguistic reasons for the emergence of particular mappings in a single semantic field. Essentially, what I hope to achieve in doing this is to highlight the diversity that characterises metaphor and metonymy in the broadest senses of the terms. Over 40 years ago, Max Black warned: ‘Metaphor is a loose word, at best, and we must beware of attributing to it stricter rules of usage than are actually found in practice’ (Black 1962: 28–9). I would suggest that this broadness in the way the term ‘metaphor’ is used reflects genuine complexity and diversity in the concept it denotes, and the same is true of metonymy.

1.2 BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE STUDY OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY¹

1.2.1 *Early work on metaphor*

Historically, metaphor and related phenomena have attracted a general lack of enthusiasm from linguists. This is not to say they have been ignored: as far back as Aristotle, who is thought to have begun the tradition of studying figurative language, widespread interest in metaphor stretched into various disciplines, notably literary criticism and philosophy. But as modern linguistics emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, a growing determination that it be given the status of a science followed. Preoccupation with data that could be recorded precisely (phonetics received a great deal of attention) left little room for semantics, let alone figurative language that could not be accommodated easily in a typical grammar. Metaphor was considered to be ‘a species of figurative language which needs explaining, or explaining away ... a kind of anomaly of language (Schön 1993: 137). Leonard Bloomfield’s *Language* (1933) was typical of this period: in over 500 pages, there are only nineteen that deal with any form of semantics.

¹ The following is a brief summary only, and is intended to provide a background for the present study rather than a comprehensive account.

This left metaphor study to philosophy and literary criticism; and this is where almost all interest in the subject was rooted. In most early work, metaphor was seen by many scholars as 'a kind of decorative addition to ordinary plain language; a rhetorical device to be used at certain times to gain certain effects' (Saeed 1999: 303). Metaphor was most often discussed within guides to skill in rhetoric, and was rarely considered as its own justification. The writings of Henry Home (Lord Kames) in the eighteenth century are indicative of the work published in this era: in *Elements of Criticism*, first published in 1762, metaphor is considered along with other kinds of figurative language in a section entitled 'Figures' (Home 1993: 275ff.). Occasionally scholars did discuss the role of metaphor in language, but this comment by Shelley is very much in line with this idea of metaphor as a device used best by those with expertise in 'the art of rhetoric'.

Their language [that of poets] is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts: and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (Shelley 1891: 4-5)

His words demonstrate the view that metaphor is something 'special' or 'extraordinary' – although he talks about language being 'vitally metaphorical', he asserts that poets have an integral role in the creation of metaphor. He echoes Aristotle's famous phrase (in the *Poetics*): 'The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted to another: it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances' (quoted in Richards 1936: 89).

Naturally, therefore, 'literary' metaphor was deemed the most interesting and worthy of notice. As well as this, there was a prevailing attitude that metaphor was potentially a misleading and deceptive linguistic tool, and this idea can still be found. Max Black went as far as to say: 'Addiction to metaphor is held to be illicit, on the principle that whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all... No doubt metaphors are dangerous ...' (Black 1962: 25, 47). Around the same time, a similar view was expressed by Colin Turbayne:

I try to explode the metaphysics of mechanism ... by exposing mechanism as a case of being victimized by metaphor. Descartes and Newton I choose as excellent examples of metaphysicians of mechanism *malgré eux*, that is to say, as unconscious victims of the metaphor of the great machine ... All this is so in spite of the meager opposition offered by the theologians, a few poets, and fewer phi-

losophers, who, in general, have been victimized by their own metaphors to the same degree as their rivals. (Turbayne 1962: 5)

Though the majority of linguists would distance themselves from using terminology like 'dangerous' and 'misleading' in regard to metaphor, the idea that choice of metaphor can frame situations or people in different ways and influence the attitudes of others has certainly been taken on. It is also beginning to exert practical influence in a wider context. Currently, in the US particularly, political and media organisations are beginning to employ linguists (including Lakoff) to advise them of the best ways to 'market' themselves and their policies.

It was not until the early twentieth century, notably with I. A. Richards (whose interest lay mainly in literary criticism), that any detailed account of the workings of figurative language was attempted. In retrospect Richards's work on metaphor was groundbreaking, and the impact of his new perspective was far-reaching. He was one of the first to recognise that metaphor was not the unusual, extraordinary phenomenon that it had been widely regarded to be, describing it as the 'omnipresent principle of language', which 'we cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without' (Richards 1936: 92). He went on to say that metaphor was also common in scientific discourse and technical language. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the discipline, over forty years before Lakoff & Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By*, was his assertion that metaphor was more significant than a mere rhetorical flourish:

The traditional theory noticed only a few of the modes of metaphor; and limited its application of the term *metaphor* to a few of them only. And thereby it made metaphor seem to be a verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words, whereas fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom. To improve the theory of metaphor we must remember this. (Richards 1936: 94)

By bringing in the labels 'tenor' and 'vehicle' to distinguish between the two 'halves' of a metaphor (ie the concept being referred to and the concept being used metaphorically to refer to it), Richards created a useful terminology for future scholars. By simply attempting to look at the complexity of metaphorical expression, he cleared the way for more precise, more analytical investigations of metaphor.

The work of the philosopher Max Black in the 1960s has also been influential, and continues to be referenced by current scholars. Within the context of philosophy, Black was interested in the limitations of traditional theories in accounting for the way metaphor works, presenting a critique of

the widely held *substitution view* (his terminology), and the closely related *comparison view* (Black 1962: 31–9). The substitution view holds that metaphorical expression is used as a substitute for some equivalent literal expression that the reader/hearer must ‘decipher’: Black’s example is using ‘Richard is a lion’ to mean ‘Richard is brave’. This is a standard definition for metaphor, found for example in the *OED* entry: ‘The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression.’ The comparison view is a slightly more sophisticated version of the substitution view, holding that metaphorical expression is simply condensed simile and can therefore be replaced by a literal comparison: to use Black’s example again, ‘Richard is a lion’ stands for ‘Richard is like a lion (in being brave)’. In his criticism of the substitution view, he claims that metaphor is reduced either to a convenient source of catachresis, existing to compensate for inadequacy in the lexicon, or to a mere decoration of language. Both of these are problematic, as Richards had previously noted:

There are, however, many metaphors where the virtues ascribed to catachresis cannot apply, because there is, or there is supposed to be, some readily available and equally compendious literal equivalent ... Except in cases where a metaphor is a catachresis that remedies some temporary imperfection of literal language, the purpose of metaphor is to entertain and divert. Its use, on this view, always constitutes a deviation from the ‘plain and strictly appropriate style’ (Whately). So, if philosophers have something more important to do than give serious pleasure to their readers, metaphor can have no serious place in philosophical discussion. (Richards 1936: 33–4)

Black is equally unconvinced by the comparison view: ‘it suffers from a vagueness that borders upon vacuity’ (1962: 37). In other words, there are no rules to guide a reader as to which characteristics are theoretically being compared, and often it is hard to find objectively recognisable, ‘literal’ resemblances. Building on Richards’s suggestion that the ideas in metaphor ‘co-operate in an inclusive meaning’ (Richards 1936: 119), Black suggests that the alternative *interaction view* is a more realistic theory of the way metaphors function.

... in the given context the focal word ... obtains a new meaning, which is not quite its meaning in literal uses, nor quite the meaning which any literal substitute would have. The new context ... imposes extension of meaning upon the focal word. And I take Richards to be saying that for the metaphor to work the reader must remain aware of the extension of meaning – must attend to both the old and the new meanings together. (Black 1962: 38–9)

In my opinion, the strength of this theory lies in its defined yet flexible nature: it applies (perhaps more or less obviously) to all types of metaphoric expression without requiring any amendment. Previous theories had all been demonstrated to be inapplicable or irrelevant in certain cases, but at last here was a simple yet convincing alternative. The interaction view of metaphor has gained the general approval of many subsequent scholars, and has informed much of the later work in the field, which picks up this idea that in some mappings only selected elements of the source are 'imported' while elements of the target are also retained. For example, Fauconnier & Turner's work on conceptual blending (1998; 2002; discussed in section 3.4.1) emphasises the way in which only certain features from a range of 'inputs' can combine to form a cognitively cohesive whole, i.e. a 'blend'. In their model, elements of more than one source or input can be involved in any blend, and metaphor is only one potential kind of input, alongside others such as metonymy, frames and cultural models.

After Black and during the 1960s and 1970s, semantics gradually began to be accepted as a viable part of linguistics, and linguists at last began to turn their attention towards figurative language as a valid and justifiable topic for study. The Bloomfieldian view that linguistics should be 'scientific' was still very much in evidence in much of the work done around this time (and continues to be important); but semantics was increasingly being taken more seriously, and this bred early attempts in what would now be termed 'cognitive linguistics'. In turn, this laid the foundations for later, more realistic examinations of what the term 'metaphor' constitutes and how it works. An increase of interest in meaning (bolstered by the work being done with componential analysis and prototype theory), and the resulting acceptance of metaphor as central in the development of polysemy, were factors that lent credibility to its study. The work of R. A. Waldron is indicative of this: in *Sense and Sense Development* he examines 'metaphoric transfer' in the context of diachronic meaning change (Waldron 1979: 162–85).

1.2.2 Metaphors We Live By, and the work of Lakoff et al.

It is in the last 20 years that metaphor has been recognised as a central element of linguistics, and perhaps the most significant influence on the field has been that of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Much of their work, both individually and collaboratively, has been important, but it is *Metaphors We Live By* that has had the greatest impact on study in linguistics, and has stimulated a wave of fresh interest in metaphor. Lakoff & Johnson looked beyond the role of metaphor in language and focused instead on its relationship to thought. The result is a coherent and convincing account of the way that metaphor underlies the fundamental structuring of concepts.