Introducing Metaphor

Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon

INTRODUCING METAPHOR

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Murray Knowles
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February 2005

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INTRODUCING METAPHOR

Introducing Metaphor is an accessible introduction to the different ways in which metaphor permeates all areas of language, and other methods of communication, covering both theoretical and practical approaches to the analysis of texts.

Combining a variety of approaches to this widely studied subject, the book provides a thorough grounding in metaphor and word meaning, theories on the processing and understanding of metaphorical language, and metaphor in other languages and translation.

Knowles and Moon draw on a wide selection of authentic examples to explore metaphor in relation to text, discourse, and society. Metaphors are examined in a range of contexts such as politics, sport, and advertising, while literary metaphor is demonstrated through fiction and poetry. A final section covering non-verbal metaphor looks at metaphor in art, cinema, and music, further demonstrating metaphor theory in practice.

Featuring suggestions for further reading on topics in each chapter, and an appendix for small-scale research investigations into metaphor, *Introducing Metaphor* will be invaluable to undergraduate students of English Language, Linguistics, and Literature.

Murray Knowles and **Rosamund Moon** are lecturers in English at the University of Birmingham.

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1

INTRODUCING METAPHOR

To begin, the opening of a speech from *Hamlet*:

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them . . .

Knowing that this is a book about metaphor, you might, as you read through those lines, have picked out examples of figurative language: *the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune* or *a sea of troubles*, and the idea of taking arms, taking up weapons, against something intangible. Here now are the closing lines of Yeats's poem 'Byzantium':

> Marbles of the dancing floor
> Break bitter furies of complexity,
> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

The whole poem is packed densely with symbols and elaborate ideas, and here you might have picked out figurative language such as *bitter*

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furies of complexity or *that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea*, or the idea of images 'begetting' other images. These kinds of creative, poetic, expression and idea are typical of literature, and it is literature with which metaphor is often associated.

But metaphor is not just a kind of artistic embellishment, at the rarefied end of linguistic usage, divorced and isolated from everyday communication. It is instead a basic phenomenon that occurs throughout the whole range of language activity. It is the intention of this book to introduce the study of metaphor and other kinds of figurative language, and to show how and why it is so important.

And, as you read that last paragraph, you might have noticed *its* metaphors: for example, *rarefied* and *divorced*. A typical context for *rarefied* is in relation to air which is less easy to breathe because of its distance above sea level (*rarefied* means 'less dense' or 'less solid'); and the typical context for *divorced* is in relation to the ending of marriages. We will come back later to the question of how we make sense of metaphors like these: for the time being, it is worth noting that 'divorced' might have different connotations for different people, according to their moral, religious, or political viewpoint. *Isolated*, too, could be classified as metaphorical, at least in terms of its etymology: it ultimately derives from a Latin word *insula* meaning 'island'. At a deeper, perhaps subconscious, level, we can identify a metaphorical conceptualization in phrases such as *at the . . . end of linguistic usage* and *occurs throughout the whole range of language activity*: here 'diversity' is represented, in some way, as if it had physical dimensions and existed in physical space. Finally, by referring to *the intention of this book*, we attributed our own intentions as authors to an inanimate object. This too is figurative.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book deals first with background and theoretical issues. In this first chapter, we will begin to define metaphor and to identify its different aspects, along with other kinds of figurative language, including metonymy. Chapter 2 looks at metaphor in relation to the meanings of words and phrases; Chapter 3 at systems of metaphor (some obvious, some operating subconsciously) and at how we conceptualize experience through them; and Chapter 4 looks at metonymy. Chapter 5 looks at models of how we understand metaphor, while Chapter 6 looks at

crosslinguistic aspects of figurative language. Later chapters of this book take a different approach, and focus on figurative language in context. Chapter 7 considers evaluative and ideological aspects of metaphor in a range of social contexts; Chapter 8 considers literary metaphor; Chapter 9 considers non-verbal metaphor; and Chapter 10 rounds off by presenting some final examples. We give suggestions for what to read next at the end of each chapter, and suggestions for student research into aspects of figurative language in an appendix.

THE MEANING OF METAPHOR

Before going any further, we need to establish a working definition of **metaphor**. When we talk about metaphor, we mean the use of language to refer to something other than what it was originally applied to, or what it 'literally' means, in order to suggest some resemblance or make a connection between the two things. We can illustrate this with two examples taken from the Bank of English corpus (BoE), a 450-million-word corpus of recent English texts (see Chapter 5 for discussion of corpus linguistics and metaphor). In this case, they are metaphorical uses of single words or phrases, although metaphors can be developed over much longer stretches of text:

> The **jewel** in Northumbria's ecclesiastical **crown** is Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, built as a monastery in 635 and reached by a tidal causeway.

> We used to **thrash** all the teams in the Keith Schoolboy League. We had a great squad and no-one could **touch** us.

Clearly, a priory is not a jewel in the way that a diamond or sapphire is, nor does Northumbria have any sort of ceremonial headgear in the way that a monarch traditionally has: the literal meanings of *jewel* and *crown*. Clearly, one team is unlikely to have hit the other teams with sticks or whips, and equally unlikely is the impossibility of anyone making physical contact: the literal meanings of *thrash* and *touch*. We recognize these words in these contexts as exaggerations and non-literal, and we interpret them accordingly. *Jewel* represents something that is valuable, attractive, and desirable, and *a jewel in —'s crown* refers to the most important or valuable achievement; *thrash* suggests the totality of a victory, and *touch* suggests achievements and success which are much greater than others seem capable of.

This explanation of metaphor is of course dependent on a definition of literalness. Unless we identify and agree what the **literal** meaning of a word or expression is, we cannot identify and agree what is metaphorical. We will come back to defining literalness when we consider different kinds of figurative language later on in this chapter.

THE IMPORTANCE OF METAPHOR

Metaphor is pervasive in language, and there are two principal ways in which it is important.

First, in relation to individual words: metaphor is a basic process in the formation of words and word meanings. Concepts and meanings are **lexicalized**, or expressed in words, through metaphor. Many senses of multi-sense words are metaphors of different kinds, as in he meanings of *field*, *hurt*, and *dark* in the following BoE examples:

> She has published extensively in the **field** of psychology.

> The failure has **hurt** him deeply.

> . . . the end of a long tale, full of **dark** hints and unspeakable innuendos.

Similarly, the names of many new concepts or devices are metaphorical or extended uses of pre-existing words: for example, computer terms such as *web*, *bug*, and *virus*. Many compound words encapsulate metaphors: *browbeat*, *foothill*, *pigeonhole*. Idioms and proverbs are often metaphorical in origin: *don't put all your eggs in one basket*, *miss the boat*, *rattle someone's cage*, and, more obscurely, *kick the bucket* and *a red herring*. These are mainly **conventional** metaphors (see below), and we will discuss them further in Chapter 2.

Second, in relation to discourse: metaphor is important because of its functions – explaining, clarifying, describing, expressing, evaluating, entertaining. There are many reasons *why* we use metaphors in speech or writing: not least, because there is sometimes no other word to refer to a particular thing. But where we have a choice, we choose metaphors in order to communicate what we think or how we feel about something; to explain what a particular thing is like; to convey a meaning in a more interesting or creative way; or to do all of these. We will

look at examples later. Significantly, a lot of our understanding of things is mediated through metaphor. That is, we might well not understand them except with the help of metaphorical models or analogies, and our understanding is itself conditioned by the metaphor. For example, the cells in our bodies react biologically in complex ways to infection: we can understand the process more easily through a metaphor of war, thinking of it in terms of fighting and invasion, as in

> Scientists believe stress may suppress development of T-cells, the white blood cells which help to **fight off invading** micro-organisms.
>
> (BoE)

Other metaphors might have been used, but this is the dominant, most familiar one, and the way in which we now conceptualize the biological process is determined by it. Similarly with the example *throughout the whole range*, from earlier in this chapter: we represent diversity as physical space. It is typical that metaphors use concrete images to convey something abstract, helping to communicate what is hard to explain.

CREATIVE AND CONVENTIONAL METAPHORS

We began this chapter with examples of literary language: with *the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune* and *that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea*, Shakespeare and Yeats create poetic effects by creating new images. We informally described this kind of language as creative, but *creative* has a more technical meaning when applied to metaphor. **Creative metaphors** are those which a writer/speaker constructs to express a particular idea or feeling in a particular context, and which a reader/hearer needs to deconstruct or 'unpack' in order to understand what is meant. They are typically new (another term is **novel metaphor**), although they may be based on pre-existing ideas or images, such as a traditional representation of fortune as a person, whether enemy or friend. Creative metaphor is often associated with literature, but there are plenty of instances of it in other genres. Here are two taken from, respectively, a tourist guide and restaurant criticism, which we will return to later on:

> The main street follows a higgledy-piggledy contour from the safe, sandy cove beside which the east village sits, towards a busy harbour full of the rippled

reflections of brightly coloured fishing boats and **cradled by the crooked finger** of the harbour wall.

(Greenwood et al. *The Rough Guide to Ireland*, 1999: 227)

Got second Martini. No delicate shaving of lemon peel, just twisted to release oils, but two strips of thick peel bearing pith. And it was warm. Not **the silver bullet whistling through the rigging**, as it should be.

(Matthew Fort *The Guardian* (*Weekend*), 17 March 2001)

Creative metaphors contrast with **conventional metaphors**. These are metaphorical usages which are found again and again to refer to a particular thing. Cases in point are the metaphors of cells *fighting off* infection and of micro-organisms *invading*; and the metaphorical meanings of *divorced* to mean 'completely separated' and *field* to refer to a specialized subject or activity. These kinds of metaphor are institutionalized as part of the language. Much of the time we hardly notice them at all, and do not think of them as metaphorical when we use or encounter them: dictionaries are likely to record them as separate senses.

The term **dead metaphor** is sometimes used to refer to conventional metaphors, especially those which people do not recognize as metaphorical in ordinary usage. We will not use this term, but it can be found in many discussions of metaphor.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: TERMS AND TYPES

So far, the metaphors mentioned have been of very different kinds, and it will already have become clear that the term metaphor itself covers several different linguistic phenomena. What they have in common is that they are non-literal, figurative uses of language. While metaphor is the best-known form of figurative language, there are others too. We now need to look at figurative language more widely, and to introduce simile and metonymy: we also need to define some terms more precisely.

We have used the term non-literal: but what is **literal**? How do we know or identify what the literal meanings of a word or utterance are? In the simplest cases, a word's literal meanings refer to a concrete entity – something with physical existence in the world – and its non-literal meanings refer to something abstract, or to abstract qualities.

Word	*Literal meaning*	*Metaphorical meaning*
fox	an animal	a cunning, wily person
jewel	an ornamental precious stone	something valuable
mountain	a large piece of rock/ground	a large amount of something

So the literal meaning here is the most basic and physical meaning: the meaning that is most likely to occur to us if we are asked to explain what the word means, out of context. The literal meaning is also typically the earliest historically: metaphor is a historical (or diachronic) process.

Metaphors, therefore, are instances of non-literal language that involve some kind of comparison or identification: if interpreted literally, they would be nonsensical, impossible, or untrue. The comparison in a metaphor is implicit. If we say that someone is a fox or that something is a jewel, we are comparing them to a fox or jewel, and mean that they have some of the qualities that are traditionally associated with foxes or jewels.

A subtype of metaphor is **personification**, where something inanimate is treated as if it has human qualities or is capable of human actions. In *to take arms against a sea of troubles*, troubles are personified as a human enemy – as is 'outrageous fortune'; similarly with the cells and micro-organisms in *the white blood cells which help to fight off invading micro-organisms*. Two further examples are

> 15 years later the company moved into the **friendly glass and brick building** in Wellington Circus, with its almost circular auditorium designed by Peter Moro.
>
> (BoE)

> The wind began to **scream**, and we could see **the tops of the long-leafed pine trees doing a mad dance** against the black sky.
>
> (BoE)

where it is, of course, not the building which is actually friendly, nor are the trees actually dancing; while verbs such as *scream*, *howl*, *whisper*, *shriek*, which more literally describe human or animal noises, are conventionally used metaphorically to describe the sound made by the wind, machines, or other inanimates. Personification as a kind of metaphorical transfer or anthropomorphism can be important, as we will see in Chapters 7 and 8.

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