

## Lecture 16 Metaphor, Thought, and Semantic Content

1. **objectivism** (truth-conditional semantics) vs. **subjectivism** (cognitive semantics)

Objectivism: Traditional approaches where metaphor is based on the shift of properties from one concept to another, from the *source domain* to the *target domain*.

Subjectivism: We categorize the world largely through metaphors. No literal/figurative distinction. *Image schemas*: conceptual structures acquired through experiencing the world (moving bodies, relations between objects, force exerted by objects on other objects, etc.).

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2. **\*Comparison theories** (from Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian)

Metaphorical utterances involve similarity, resemblance between objects. *A referentialist view*.

Sally is a dragon.

Similarity helps in comprehension of metaphors but is not part of their meaning. Similes can be literal or metaphorical:

Mary is like her sister.

Mary is like a fish.

Metaphors are open-ended: Juliet is the sun.

‘Similarity is a vacuous predicate: any two things are similar in some respect or other.’  
Searle (1979: 106).

\*Juliet is for the most part gaseous.

\*Juliet is 90 million miles from the earth.

3. **\*Interaction theories** (Richards, Black)

There is a verbal opposition (interaction) between the content of the expression used metaphorically and the content of the literal context. *A descriptivist view*.

Mary is a dragon.

? My little princess is a dragon. (no literal context!)

My daughter is a dragon.

4. **Searle’s pragmatic approach**

Shift of properties from one concept to another.

He is a snake.

Metaphor as a departure from literal language (Searle 1979). Metaphorical meaning is speaker meaning.

Literal meaning, indirect speech acts, ironical use, and metaphor in:  
It is getting hot in here.

Sally is a block of ice.  
vs. Sally is an extremely unemotional and unresponsive person.

You are my star.

‘The basic principle on which all metaphor works is that the utterance of an expression with its literal meaning and corresponding truth conditions can, in various ways that are specific to metaphor, call to mind another meaning and corresponding set of truth conditions.’

Searle (1979: 99)

Searle: sentence meaning (literal meaning) and speaker meaning  
(metaphorical meaning).

‘Temperature metaphors for emotional and personal traits are in fact quite common and they are not derived from any literal underlying similarities. Thus we speak of a “heated argument”, “a warm welcome”, “a lukewarm friendship”, and “sexual frigidity”.’

Searle (1979: 108)

## 5. **Relevance theory** (a pragmatic approach)

‘...metaphor involves an interpretive relation between the propositional form of an utterance and the thought it represents.’

Sperber & Wilson (1986: 231)

‘From the standpoint of relevance theory, there is no reason to think that the optimally relevant interpretive expression of a thought is always the most literal one. The speaker is presumed to aim at optimal relevance, not at literal truth. The optimal interpretive expression of a thought should give the hearer information about that thought which is relevant enough to be worth processing, and should require as little processing effort as possible.’

S&W (1986: 233)

Metaphoricalness is a matter of degree of departure from literalness: a degree of resemblance between the thought and the utterance.

cf. **Gricean pragmatic approach**: metaphor (an implicature) is recognised when the maxims are (i) flouted or (ii) observed but the proposition is conversationally inadequate.

Carston 2002: creation of *ad hoc concepts* Robert is a bulldozer.

‘On the updated account, on which an *ad hoc* concept BULLDOZER\* is constructed, the idea is that certain elements of the encyclopaedic entry of BULLDOZER which are highly accessible in the particular context are carried over into the construction of the new concept which, as a constituent of the explicature, warrants the particular implicatures derived.’

Carston (2002: 350).

## 6. The revival of the semantic approach

Cohen (1979): metaphoricalness is a feature of sentences rather than speaker's meaning and relies on cancellation of some essential features of objects.

The clouds are made of pure gold. [~~metallie~~]

- Semantic features must be ordered on a scale of importance.
- Metaphor is usually attached to the comment rather than topic in the sentence. ('stone<sub>TOPIC</sub> lion<sub>COMMENT</sub>')

'The "interpretations" of a metaphor (type) are the *contents* its tokens express in their respective contexts. Since there is an unlimited, or not antecedently fixed, number of different possible contexts in which those tokens can occur, there is an unlimited number of different possible contents those tokens can express metaphorically. (...) [T]he variations in content seem to follow a pattern of corresponding variations in their respective contexts; (...) there are also constraints on the possible metaphorical interpretations (in different contexts) of one expression (type). Furthermore, those constraints look like those that govern specific kinds of literal interpretations of language. These facts suggest that a speaker has a more abstract kind of knowledge apart from his knowledge of the particular content of each metaphorical token in its respective context. This more abstract piece of knowledge is the *character* of the metaphor.

As with the character of any expression, the character of an expression interpreted metaphorically is a function, or rule, that determines, for each context, its content in that context.' Stern (2000: 105)

The **character** (linguistic expression) determines different **contents** (semantic value) for different contexts.

Leezenberg (2001, e.g. 149-150): it is not sentence-type but rather *sentence in context* that is interpreted metaphorically.

'...the semantic interpretation process of metaphor is crucially and systematically context-dependent. (...) [A] metaphor like *John is a wolf* expresses the assertion that John belongs to the extension of the predicate *wolf* within a specific thematic dimension of the context; in other words, it ascribes a contextually determined property to John.' Leezenberg (2001: 251)

## !7. Davidson (1978): there is nothing non-literal to metaphors: metaphors mean what the words literally mean.

'...there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character.' Davidson (1978: 263)

## 8. Dead metaphors give rise to polysemy – 'mouth of the river'; 'foot of the mountain', which is a semantic phenomenon, metaphorical extension of meaning. (E. Traugott: PCI → GCI → semanticization)

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## 9. Cognitive theories (subjectivism)

Most meanings are metaphorical; we do not arrive at them through reinterpretation but through an access to conceptualization.

Cognitivists stress the predictability of metaphors because they are mechanisms of conceptualization.

(vs.: Davidson and Searle emphasize live metaphors to show that their meanings are open-ended.)

Cognitive semanticists: metaphor is commonly present in language use and there is no literal/figurative distinction.

*Experiential Hypothesis*: children have certain preconceptual experiences, e.g. body movements, ability to move objects, perceive them, and they also have image-schemata such as containers, paths, up and down, part and whole, front and back. Abstract concepts arise from these preconceptual physical experiences by metaphorical projection: The prices are going *up*.

Time is money: to save time  
 Life is a journey: routes to success  
 Mind is body: to grasp an idea

up is good, down is bad: I'm feeling down.  
 (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980)

Metaphors are systematic, asymmetrical, usually created by transferring features of a more concrete object (source) to a more abstract one (target).

MONEY → TIME  
 JOURNEY → LIFE (He made his way in life.)  
 BODY → MIND (I see what you mean.)

Metaphors are mappings from source models to target models.

an argument is a journey  
 an argument is a battle  
 an argument is a container  
 an argument is a building

He strayed from the line of argument. (image schema: *following a path*)

BODY → MIND:  
 seeing → understanding  
 hearing → obeying  
 tasting → choosing

Words change their meaning with time BECAUSE of the metaphors that underlie our conceptualization of the world.

metonymic links:

'physical agitation stands for the emotion' (metonymy)  
 'the emotion is a natural force' (metaphor)

Fear overwhelms you. (metaphorical expression)  
→ scenarios

10. Metaphors in politics and science:

Unemployment is a contagious disease.  
The atom is a miniature solar system.  
(Ungerer & Schmid 1996: 150, 148)

- Conceptual metaphors can aid our thinking in two ways: as explanatory or constitutive metaphors. Explanatory metaphors are used to make it easier for the layman to understand complex scientific, political and social issues. Constitutive metaphors are an integral part of theorizing about these problems.
- While popular theories about natural phenomena tend to rely on constitutive metaphors, scientific theorizing is primarily non-metaphorical, but may also make use of some metaphorical elements.
- In politics, the explanatory function of metaphors is often subjected to the goal of manipulation, which means that metaphors are often primarily selected for their emotional effects.
- Popular political thinking largely depends on constitutive metaphors, which are often consciously created and fostered by politicians and propagandists.
- Political theorizing is also frequently based on constitutive metaphors, and since these metaphors may disguise important aspects of the issue that should have been considered, the effect may be negative or destructive. [as in: “The state is a single person”]’  
Ungerer & Schmid (1996: 152)

Stylistic embellishments, non-literal meanings OR aids in categorization, thinking about the world?

*Suggested reading*

*Introductory:*

Searle 1979b  
Ungerer & Schmid 1996, chptr 3  
Jaszczolt 2002, ch 17  
Leezenberg 2001, chs 1-2  
Kövecses 2002

*More advanced/detailed:*

Lakoff 1987a; 1996  
Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999  
Cohen 1979  
Davidson 1978  
Carston 2002, ch 5  
Stern 2000  
Leezenberg 2001, chs 3-4  
Goatly 1997  
Lakoff & Turner 1989  
Johnson 1987  
Kittay 1987  
Sweetser 1990