A SEMANTIC APPROACH TO METAPHOR

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1. To the extent that transformational grammarians have concerned themselves with the subject of metaphor, there has been a fairly general acceptance of an idea implicit in Chomsky's discussions of "degrees of grammaticality." (See especially Noam Chomsky, "Degrees of Grammaticalness") This idea is that metaphorical language is "semi-grammatical," and is thus either caused by, or, at least, best approached in terms of the violation of some form of selection restrictions.

Perhaps "acceptance" here indicates nothing more than an assumption. This was a plausible direction in which to proceed, as long as the purity of syntax was inviolate.. And it had the further advantage of employing apparatus already necessary for syntactic analysis. But, whatever its status may have been, the survival of this view at the present time, when the majority of transformationalists have rejected not only selection restrictions, but the whole notion of an independent syntax, betrays a real lack of coherence in our growth as a science. We have attacked and destroyed the walls and the very foundations of a castle, and yet somehow left its battlements and fragile towers hovering undisturbed above the wreckage.

What is most disturbing about this situation, however, is the source of this collective inconsistency. There is, it seems, a kind of stigma about the subject of metaphor. It may be that it is too much akin to art or poetry. And under the remaining influence of 19th Century Romanticism, the tendency is to think that art and especially poetry are somehow essentially nonanalyzable--some form of pure lyric gurglings. But neither is the structure of the Academy helpful in this respect: one is led to believe that men and departments of literature have "rights," as it were, on this subject. And imbedded, internalized norms dictate that one shall not do what is defined as "another's thing."

Or perhaps it is more simply a question of what language is most worth analyzing. In which case the conclusion must be that, apart from a few exceptions, we are most interested in the language found in reading primers and in language of such syntactic or logical complexity that it is rarely spoken. The language of children, because it is simple; the language of scientists because it is dear to our hearts.

In any case, the lag and the logical inconsistency in our understanding of metaphor persists because, for some reason, it is not considered important to bring it up-to-date. This has not been demonstrated, however, and thus the belief that what goes on in metaphor is peripheral to an understanding of language is simple presupposition. The question of its importance is an empirical one, not subject to academic boundaries.

In the present paper, I will take the position that metaphor is one of the more important and interesting of the phenomena involved in human communication. For in attempting to update the idea of metaphor somewhat, I have been confronted with a type of context sensitivity in the most mundane of utterances which present models

simply do not allow for. All statements may be potential metaphors. And if this is the case, the phenomenon is probably far more important to linguists and departments of linguistics than it is to critics and deparments of literature.

The object of this paper is thus threefold: to discuss, first of all, various reasons for not viewing metaphor as a deviation from some selectional norm; to explore, secondly, something of the real range of metaphorical language; and thirdly, to propose and discuss some implications of an explanation of metaphor based on the concept of referentiality.

2. A major argument against approaching metaphor from the point of view of selectional deviance is, of course, simply that the existence of these restrictions, along with the form of analysis from which they sprang, have been called into question. At least one explicit argument (James D. McCawley, "The Role of Semantics in a Grammar") has undermined the plausibility of such linguistic entities. And large numbers of proposals for the generation of sentences from underlying semantic rather than syntactic structures simply do not require this restriction on lexical items.

For the moment, however, let us ignore this fact, proceed as if there were no independent grounds for the rejection of these rules, and undertake a brief discussion of the consequences of analyzing metaphor in this fashion. In this case, there remain at least three very viable and, to my mind, compelling arguments against the position.

First, the assumption of, or the search for, some connection between selectional deviance and the phenomenon of metaphor is prejudgment. As such, it immediately perturbs one's initial questions on the subject. Thus, in fact, although (2.1-4) represent the logical beginnings of a linguistic analysis of metaphor, (2.5) has been the starting point for those who accept this viewpoint.

What, exactly, is a metaphor? (2.1)
What happens linguistically when people speak in this fashion? (2.2)
What makes us take some utterances literally and others metaphorically? (2.3)
Is there any relation between present models and what seems to be going on in metaphor? (2.4)

What selection rules in the syntactic grammar were relaxed in generating this utterance, which I intuitively feel is metaphorical? (2.5)

Secondly, consonant with a bad beginning, the way proceeds now into nothing less than a grammatical morass. Not all relaxations of selection restrictions result in metaphor. Many produce anomalies. Further elucidation, therefore, of the assumed or hoped-for connection between selectional deviance and metaphor requires investigation of this discrepancy. Which cannot be performed except on the basis of a fair number of real, adequately-formulated and tested sets of selection restrictions.

And if this is not already prohibitive and far from the point, then the syntactic form of most metaphors certainly renders it so.

For most commonly occurring metaphors involve either prepositional phrases, or modifiers derived from imbedded sentences of the form, "X 'is" Y." Thus, at the very least, one must know what selection restrictions operate across "is," and have an understanding of how they behave in whatever underlies prepositional phrases. To put it simply, this attempt to analyze metaphor plunges immediately into some of the least understood areas of the English language.

Finally, the strongest possible evidence that this entire point of view is indeed a prejudgment and not likely to yield an understanding of metaphor is the existence of a class of utterances with the following two characteristics: (1) they violate no conceivable sort of selection restrictions; and (2), they are precisely what we intuitively recognize as metaphors. Let us look at a few examples of this class.

Consider, to begin with, (2.6), a statement I made in the second paragraph of this paper.

> We have attacked and destroyed the walls and the very foundations of a castle, and yet somehow left its battlements and fragile towers hovering undisturbed above the wreckage. (2.6)

This is a perfectly well-formed utterance about castles, towers, and wreckage. It violates no grammatical rules. In context, however, we processed it and understood it as a statement about such things as pure syntax, the analysis of metaphor, and an odd situation in transformational grammar. Another highly similar example is (2.8) in the context of (2.7).

> He suspected that most of his listeners were sympathetic to the position that selection restrictions were totally inadequate. (2.7) But he attacked the sputtering tyrant once again, if only to place his little penknife alongside the daggers of his companions. (2.8)

(2.8) is exactly what is termed a "metaphor," but it has no trace of linguistic deviance.

Clearly, I have created these metaphors in each case by specifying a context before making a normal, non-deviant utterance. It is crucial to realize that non-verbal contexts, such as current events, or simply the physical situation of the speaker and the listener, can easily trigger the same kind of non-literal readings.

Thus, in the context of present-day university life in the United States, the second half of (2.9) will be processed as a metaphor.

> I stopped talking to the radicals because it is simply useless to chisel on granite walls. (2.9)

Or consider the readings assigned to (2.10) in the context of (1) a group of people on a geology expedition, and (2) a group of students walking out of the office of some staunch old professor emeritus.

> The rock is becoming brittle with age. (2.10)

In context (1), (2.10) will almost certainly function literally. In context (2), however, one can say with equal certainty that part of (2.10)--namely, "rock," and "brittle"--will function metaphorically, while the rest remains perfectly literal.

There seems to be no need to belabor this point. Examples of this class of sentences can be constructed ad infinitum, and may be found without difficulty in everyday speech as well as literary works. A great deal more could be said about them. At most, they indicate, as I mentioned, that all statements may be potential metaphors.[1] At the very least, they are counterexamples to the notion that metaphor has a necessary connection with grammatical deviance.

3. The proposal I will offer as to the nature and perhaps cause of what occurs in mteaphor is, I believe, a substantive one. But no proposal can reduce the innate complexity of this phenomenon. Nor can what I have to say, at this stage, be instantly and neatly formalized. I cannot--to make another metaphor--present you with a set of transistorized components that plug right into the back of your latest 70 watt grammar. I ask you to bear with me, therefore, if I spend a few minutes trying to demonstrate the full range of the problem and attempting to ensure a clear understanding of the conceptual tools I hope to use in handling it.

4. To begin with, it is imperative that we confront the idea of selection restrictions once again. This time to question not simply their value for the analysis of metaphor, but their value and place in any analysis of the way humans communicate. For there is a sense in which this concept and the strict, generative mentality with which we began have exercised a real tyranny over our minds. Among other things, they have, I believe, blinded us to significant portions of the data we must explain. Some of this data is very important to the question of metaphor. I have no choice, therefore, but to attack this dying Caesar once again.

The idea that human language, or any adequate model thereof, has a mechanism specifying some strings as formally correct and others as formally incorrect on the basis of the way in which they connect concepts mistakes the very nature of human knowledge and communication.

The grammatical device of selection restrictions rests on two very naive, epistemological fallacies which may be described in the following fashion. First, to embody in a grammar formally those restrictions which seem to operate in the normal, external physical world is to assume that all human utterances are directly and primarily concerned with describing this world. Second, to embody in a grammar those restrictions which seem to operate in the normal, external physical world is to assume that there is some normal, external physical world from which to extract them.

The fact of the matter is, however, that only a portion of human utterances are even intended to describe external events. And within this portion, such description takes place only secondarily, by means of the detailing of events internal to the speaker. And finally, because of the highly conglomerate and ever-changing nature of physical reality, there is no possibility of predicting those utterance which are intended to describe external events by any set of "normal," or "distinctive" features.

To make these statements, which I regard almost as commonplaces of scientific epistemology, somewhat clearer, let me pose and give an answer to the "fool's question." What is a word? What is it that we communicate when we utter some "lexical item"? What is, for example, a "table"?

The only rational, non-metaphysical answer which may be given to this question is that the lexical item "table" refers to an open class of actual, or recalled, or potential inputs to the speaker's sense modalities. Events, or states, if you will, internal to his complex system of devices for sampling what occurs around him.

By the term "open class" of these events, I mean that membership in the set is specified only by rule, and therefore it cannot be enumerated. The rule, in the case of "table," as in that of most lexical classes, is that the events correspond to forms or gestalts of immense complexity. The rule for "table," for instance, involves allowances for everything from lighting conditions, distance, and angle of view, to decisions about purpose. Is it a "table," a "footstool," or a "bench"?

A relatively firm implication of this answer is that the only bit of information communicated primarily and directly by the utterance of the word "table" is the speaker's decision to place some bundle of internal events in the class.

In a very large number of cases, to which linguists have paid scant attention, this bundle of events is utterly internal to the speaker, and comprises part of what we call dreams, desires, feelings, fears, or strange, perhaps garbled wishes, or memories. It is therefore almost inconceivable that there could be some formal aspect of natural languages which would tend to make these utterances conform to relationships sometimes or even often observed in external events. And a more likely assumption is that the real formal mechanisms of language allow expression of internal and external events with equal ease.

And I repeat: only decisions about internal states are communicated immediately and directly by human utterances. And thus, even in statements intended by the speaker to be descriptive of the external, physical world, this description takes place only by virtue of the indirect, and highly complicated relationship between his gestalts and particular instances of physical events. This much is implied daily by our awareness that speakers may be mistaken, misinformed, or subject to an illusion or to mental aberrations.

To say this less precisely, but more simply, speakers cannot and do not tell you about the world--they tell you about their experience of the world. If linguistics is not to re-enact one of the most violent pseudo-arguments in the history of Western philosophy, we must understand very clearly that the external reality speakers sometimes talk about is neither the free and spontaneous creation of the human mind--as "idealists" would have it--nor anything that exists apart from the human mind, and with which the human mind has some immediate, "mystical" connection--as "realists" will claim. Speakers do construct their worlds, but they construct them functionally, and according to rules.

But even this construct of the external world is not anything like the idea of selection restrictions assumes it to be. For we are continually supplementing our own rudimentary sensing

devices with new and more powerful ways of gathering information about that which we call "the external world." Physical reality, we find, is infinitely on the move. And in the context of a real understanding of "the external world," concepts such as "things," as opposed to "actions," no longer apply. One is forced, following Whitehead's example, to speak only of "events."

Because human speakers have an intuitive knowledge or perhaps acceptance of this highly conglomerate nature of external reality, there exists an enormous variety of situations in which lexical classes such as "air," or table," or "house" will be validly and literally employed.

Consider, for the moment, that you are standing in a scientific laboratory. And that what you call "air," which is subject along with most of the rest of material reality to no less than three changes of state, is presently being made to change its states. In this context, you will probably utter sentences about "air" "blowing," or "splashing," or "breaking," or "splintering." (4.1-2) are precisely the sort of thing you will say or hear.

> Excuse me, but your air is dripping on the table. (4.1)
> How hard can you push on that air before it will break? (4.2)

Or suppose you are looking at what you call a "table" under a powerful microscope, or that you examine it with the probe of a Geiger counter. (4.3-5) are then valid, literal utterances.

> Actually, as you will be able to see, the table swarms around more violently every time I turn up the heat. (4.3)
> On the basis of these observations and some quick calculations, I would say that the table is really about 68% empty space. (4.4)
> Perhaps you should not stand just there, John, the table seems to be emitting gamma rays. (4.5)

Perhaps you may retreat from all this to the normality of your home--but you may find it on fire and describe the experience with something like (4.6)

> As I got out of the car, I saw my house crackling and roaring and floating away into the atmosphere. (4.6)

The concept of selection restrictions is, in a word, an epistemological blunder of the first rank. It is based on a false notion of what speakers have to communicate about. And it assumes a naive reality behind constructs such as "things" that would have shocked even the Pre-Socratics.[2]

Heraclitus, you will remember, said: "You cannot put your foot twice into the same 'river'." We are in a position to know better. You cannot even put the same "foot" twice into the same "river."

5. It is worth noting that none of the examples yet given in this paper have contained any irregularities in what one might call their formal semantic structure. The binding of the variables, the description of arguments, the distinct linkage of arguments with some but not other predicates, the compounding of propositions whereby some predicates with their arguments function as arguments for another predicate--all of this takes place in impeccable fashion. I must submit to you that these structures, these processes are the formal heartland of natural language. And that what we have called "syntactic" structures should be considered in terms of their intricate relationships to these forms, and not as if they were anagrams generated in a semantic vacuum.

If there is any "irregularity" about the phenomenon of metaphor, it is not, I think, anything which could be termed a deviance in linguistic form. What seems to be the defining characteristic of metaphor is rather something in the referentiality of the terms employed.

To explain this, let me say that I am using the concept of "reference," and will speak of "referents," in the way that logicians and natural language philosophers have used it. A "referent" is that which a word or group of words comes to refer to in the context of an utterance. Thus, out of context, "table" does not have a "referent," except in so far as it is the name of a lexical class. In (5.1), however, it has a precise, determinable referent.

Reddy's dining-room table is dirty. (5.1)

It is most important to realize that "referentiality" is not a synonym for "meaning." Although "meaning" is often used in the sense of "referentiality," it has another very general sense which makes it imperative to keep these two terms seperate. For one of the rules whereby human speakers decide on the membership of the complex lexical class "the 'meaning' of event X" allows the inclusion in the class of anything which may be inferred from event X. To someone in possession of given knowledge, anything may "mean" anything. This usage is displayed in (5.2-3).

This skidmark means that my car was stolen. (5.2)
That paperclip on the floor means that the desk was rifled. (5.3)

Since this sense of the word applies to speech acts as well, the "meaning" of an utterance or of a word in an utterance may be whatever is implied by the fact of the utterance or by the choice of the word. And this is clearly not the "referent" of the word.

Let me now define the set of all possible referents which a word may have in human utterances as the "sphere of reference" of this word. We have seen the word "castle," however, take in actual fact something best described as "the theories of pure syntax" for its referent in the context of this paper. This would seem to suggest that the "sphere of reference" for most words is actually the universal set, or everything. For it "castle" may end up with something so remote and different as "the theories of pure syntax" for its referent, what could one rule out?

It is possible, nevertheless, to speak of a subset of a word's sphere of reference which can be fairly well defined and is highly useful. This subset I will call the "literal sphere of reference" and will define as the set of referents a word may, in context, conventionally or literally take on. The spontaneous and intuitive feeling that a word is operationg metephorically is, I believe, contingent upon the failure to find a referent for a given word within its "literal sphere of reference."

6. In order to make this concept somewhat clearer, and to show that, although they are complicated, literal spheres of reference can be delineated for various types of words, I include the following remarks on some general shapes this set can have.

At one end of the spectrum of types of literal spheres of reference are those connected with what one might call "gross physical objects or activities." I will continue to use "table" as a paradigm case for words such as these. The literal sphere of reference of the word "table" contains at least the four subparts given below.

First, all configurations of reasl sensory events from all or some of the speaker's sense modalities which conform to his gestalt "table" are in the literal sphere of reference (LSR). I will make no attempt to define this gestalt. The only exceptions to this rule are where the gestalt has no configuration in the context of a given sense modality. Thus a "table" may be something seen only, or felt only, but, normally not something tasted only, smelled only, or heard only.

Second, any of the above configurations, from all or only some of the sense modalities, as they are recalled, imagined, dreamed, combined, or otherwise shuffled about within the speaker's mind are also in the LSR. Notice that this includes constructions or combinations which may not occur at all external to the speaker's mind. In (6.1), the referent of the underlined portion may occur externally someday, but does not at the time of the speech act. In (6.2), however, the referent of the underlined portions will probably never occur external to the spearker's mind.

When I get rich, I will buy my new Alpha Romeo. (6.1)

I dreamed about this huge tree with eyes and ears that kept groaning. (6.2)

Third, if the context is clear, any artificial or symbolic renderings of any of the above configurations belong also to the LSR. This, it seems, is a very important and beautiful generality. Crucial facets of the gestalt "table" may be rendered in various ways in various artistic mediums. In a way that very much supports my arguments in Section Four, we also refer to these non-metaphorically as "tables." Consider the ambiguity of (6.3), which is completely dependent on the fact that "table" may mean "two-dimensional, colored rendering of some part of the gestalt 'table'."

Picasso paints mostly tables and people. (6.3)

Because of this capability, (6.5) is the normal way of saying what is much more precisely expressed as (6.4).

In the movie last night, the picture of Richard Burton was represented as kissing the picture of Liz Taylor 5 times. (6.4)

In the movie last night, Richard Burton kissed Liz Taylor 5 times. (6.5)

Fourth, in specific situations such as the analysis of "gross physical objects or activities" into their component physical parts or events, the LSR may contain any number of new or strange configurations, because, in this context, learning may take place and the gestalt may be subject to modification. Thus, examples (4.1-6) are, I believe, literal utterances.

At the other end of the spectrum of literal spheres of reference are those corresponding to what one might call "relational" words. Consider "pledge," or "claim." The gestalt associated with each of these words states simply that literal referents must signify a given relationship. Since almost anything could do this, the LSR of these words is without definite boundaries. Thus (6.6-7) are not metaphors.

Your only claim to the Erbacher estate was murdered last night. (6.6)

I took your pledge of eternal love and pawned it for $30.00. (6.7)

Another similar case is "symbol." (6.8) is not a metaphor, even though the referent of "symbols" is the bull's ears.

The bullfighter walked off with the bleeding symbols of his victory. (6.8)

In between these two extremes, there is an area which will require some investigation. One of the ways that language seems to grow is that metaphors become, after a time, literal usage. Thus there are a great many words, such as "latticework," "stolid," or "fruitful" which do not, in my version of the language at least, seem to have sharp divisions between concrete, root meanings and abstract extensions of this meaning.

7. I will now offer the following hypothesis about the nature and cause of metaphor.

What seems to be the defining characteristic of all instances of metaphorical language is an abnormal or unconventional situation with regard to the normal limits of referentiality on words. Metaphor occurs, it seems, whenever words in an utterance do not have referents within their conventionally defined, literal spheres of reference, as described above. Please notice that this is an essentially negative statement--I have not said that the words have, necessarily, referents outside of their literal spheres of reference. I have only stated that they do not have a referent inside this set.

The cause of this phenomenon is, I think, almost invariably the interaction between the context of an utterance and the literal spheres of reference of the terms involved. This, and this alone, is reason enough for linguists to be concerned with metaphor. Further

study of this subject will reveal, I believe, a degree of context sensitivity as yet undreamed of in transformational models.

I will conclude with the following crude description of what seems to be a very general and crucial part of the processing of human utterances. As to how such things as metaphors might be generated, I have not the faintest idea at this point.

At some point in the processing of all utterances it seems, listeners and readers make decisions, very much on the basis of context, as to whether the words in the utterance have referents within their literal spheres of reference. Undoubtedly, this decision is contingent upon some search of the LSR in question. A positive result--that is, a more or less precise and determinate referent in the set, depending on the circumstances and on how precise and explicit the utterance is--allows processing to continue in whatever fashion it normally does.

A negative result, however, causes two very different and interesting things to happen.

First, patterns of the gestalt or gestalts which defined the literal sphere of reference of the word in question are searched. Not with a view toward isolating some part of these patterns as the referent, but in an attempt to find analogies or similarities to events or configurations in the context of the utterance. A referent, or an area in which possible referents might lie, may then be determined on the basis of the context and the discovered similarities. It is possible, however, and in some cases even probable that different speakers will arrive at different referents, or that no one will arrive at any referent. For the utterance has stepped outside the conventional bounds of the language. And if it is no longer confined by them, then it is just as true that they are no longer guidelines to a unique reading.

But secondly, unique referents for those words which function metaphorically become less crucial to the understanding of the utterance. For the second sense of the word "meaning," which I described above, comes very much into play. The "meaning" of the utterance is primarily whatever is implied by the fact that something was expressed in this curious and unconventional fashion. The symbolic connection of precise referents is less a bearer of information than the fact that the speaker chose such and such a word in such and such a context.

No one, I am sure, missed the information about my own attitude conveyed by the fact that I described selection restrictions as a "dying Caesar." And although the referent of "70 watt," in the phrase, "your latest 70 watt grammar," is not very clear, the implications of the phrase were obvious.

And finally, no one, I am sure, will miss the implications of the following metaphor--with which I shall end.

> We have our collective foot halfway through one of the major doorways to the human mind, and we must either go in completely--laboratory rats, Skinner, mystics, behaviorists, innatists, mentalists, religion, selection restrictions, and academic boundaries notwithstanding--or risk having that foot cut off. (7.1)

FOOTNOTES

[1]This statement is probably too strong. A huge number of utterances are potential metaphors, however, and at least all those whose literal readings involve concrete objects or processes.

[2]During the discussion period, it was claimed that selection restrictions had always been intended as descriptions of the internal or psychological states of the speaker. So that if the speaker thinks of "air" as "liquid," the lexical item "air" will be +liquid. This seems to be stretching the point somewhat. To my knowledge, selection restrictions have never been spoken of or written of in such fashion. Should they be, they must be considered an attempt to characterize what I have been calling the "rule" or "gestalt" which governs decisions about the employment of the lexical class in question. I frankly do not believe that any system of features will ever be adequate to this task.

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