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Some philosophical problems about metaphor

A brief overview

Abstract

Starting with Aristotle's *The Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, this paper wishes to call attention to some major problems with respect to the identification and characterisation of metaphor, drawing on, among others, the works of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, John R. Searle, and Donald Davidson. It concludes that metaphor is best interpreted as a phenomenon which leads from *seeing as* to *being as* (Ricoeur).

Keywords: metaphor, Aristotle, Ricoeur, philosophy of language, poetic language

A possible way of approaching a phenomenon we wish to understand is to go back to its “origin”, to the “source” in which it first occurs.¹ In this brief overview, I will point out some major problems with respect to the identification, characterisation and the “working” of metaphor, following the logic of Aristotle's – by no means systematic or comprehensive – sections on what he calls “application” of “alien terms” in *The Poetics*. Here one may find – as if we had the famous “anatomical horse” – some central issues future theorists will struggle with; some aspects of this struggle will unfold below. Thus, my approach will be “philosophical” not only in the sense that I shall refer to philosophers rather than linguists, psychologists, neuroscientists or literary critics (many of them also deeply engaged with the problem of metaphor, with very significant results). My approach will be philosophical also in – as it is typical for philosophy – trying to survey the very conditions of the phenomenon called “metaphor” and in complicating the issue rather than offering “solutions”. Still, it will turn out that it is hard to talk about metaphor without an epistemological or ontological hindsight, since one of the chief questions about it has, more often than not, been whether it conveys some (heuristic) “knowledge”, or whether it is a mere ornament, “embellishing” our speech to make an already existing cognitive content “more picturesque” or “vivid”, and, as one of the most pertinent questions, how it is related to the being of the human being.

Aristotle deals with metaphor in his *The Poetics* (1982) and in the *Rhetoric* (1954), both most probably composed during his most mature period, when he was teaching in the Lykeion in Athens between 334 and 323 B.C. As Lynne Cameron observes in her “Operationalising ‘metaphor’ for applied linguistic research” (1999: 9)

¹ An “ancestor” of this brief essay (and to say such a thing is, of course, a metaphor itself) was once a lecture I gave at the University of Debrecen in the April of 2000, at the invitation of my first cousin, Péter Pelyvás. It is more than fit to celebrate him with this piece.

examination of the writings of Aristotle on metaphor [...] reveals an essentially cognitive view of metaphor as the substitution in discourse of one idea for another to produce new understanding. Moreover, when Aristotle discusses metaphor in the particular discourse genre of political rhetoric, employed to achieve particular interactional goals, he offers a socially contextualised view of metaphor in use.

Yet in spite of the “socially contextualised” approach, in *The Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, metaphor is not distinguished on the level of *discourse* or *sentence* but on the level of words (*lexis*); even more specifically: the level on which “metaphor” is identified is, characteristically, the level of the *Noun* (or *name*); metaphor is something that happens, typically, to the Noun. Further, Aristotle defines metaphor in terms of *movement*: metaphor is

the application of a strange [alien, allotrios] term either transferred [displaced, epiphora] from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus or from one species to another or else by analogy (1457b) (1982: 81).

Thus, metaphor is the transference of a name from one domain to another (carrying a word from one place to another); it is a *trans-position* which results in applying a name to a thing which is alien (*allotrios*) to it, as opposed to its ordinary, current (*kurion*) name(s) – if it had a name before at all. Aristotle later remarks that one of the advantages of metaphor is that through the act of transference, we can give a (single) name to a thing which previously was only circumscribed, his example is “there is no word for the action of the sun in scattering its fire” but you can say, relying on the analogy which exists between the sun scattering its rays and the ploughman sowing his seed: “*sowing* the god-created fire” [i.e.: ‘The sun is sowing’ — ‘The sun is shining’] (1457b) (1982: 83)). For Aristotle, then, there are four possibilities according to which transference may happen (1982: 81-83): (1) application of a strange term either transferred from *genus* to species, e.g. “Here stands my ship”, since for him riding at anchor is a species (a subclass) of the genus “standing”; (2) from species to genus, e.g. “Indeed ten thousand noble things Odysseus did”, since *ten thousand* is here understood as ‘many’ and *ten thousand* is a species of *many*; (3) from species to species: here the example is very difficult to understand: “Drawing off his life with the bronze” (where *bronze* most probably means a knife) and “Severing with the tireless bronze” (where *bronze* most probably means a cupping-bowl). Here for Aristotle, *drawing off* [‘to cause a liquid to flow’] is used for *severing* [‘to separate, to divide’], and *severing* for *drawing off*, and both are species of removing. A less “Greek” example might be: *This food disagreed with my stomach — I cannot digest this argument*, where *disagree* is used for *digest* and *digest* for *disagree*, and both are species of ‘(not) to accept’. These, for us hardly comprehensible examples of Aristotle are most probably from various tragedies, since they occur in the discussion of diction in tragedy, when he asks what kind of language a poet should use.

Finally, there is a fourth type of transfer (difficult to be distinguished from the *species-to-species* shift): (4) transfer by analogy or proportion, e.g. *the evening of life*, where *old age* is related to *life* as *evening* is related to *day*, i.e. the fourth term of the analogy is related to the third in the same way as the second is related to the first. In the *Poetics*, it is only here that he refers explicitly to *resemblance* (81). However, in the *Rhetoric* (which most probably was composed after *The Poetics*, since it takes the definition of metaphor for granted), Aristotle also introduces a parallel between metaphor and simile (comparison) but he subordinates simile to metaphor, e.g. he says (1412b): “successful similes are in a sense metaphors” (1954: 194). In the *Rhetoric*, metaphor is among the “virtues” of *lexis* (words), achieving, together with other means, the major goal of rhetorical speech: persuasion. Among the virtues of metaphor (*clarity, warmth, facility, appropriateness* and *elegance* — “*urbane style*”, as

Aristotle calls it) *liveliness of expression* is also mentioned: “metaphor sets the scene before our eyes” (1410b) (1954: 186-194). It is here that Aristotle talks about the instructive value of metaphor, about the pleasure of understanding, which follows metaphor’s surprise (194).

In Aristotle’s account we may recognise some elements (and major problems) of the theory of metaphor that will keep returning. The first is that the very definition of metaphor is *itself* metaphorical: the word *metaphor* goes back to Greek *metapherein* (‘to transfer’) > *meta* (‘with, after, between, among’) + *pherein* (‘to bear’): the definition of metaphor returns to itself. Is there a non-metaphorical standpoint from which the phenomenon of metaphor might be assessed? Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida will keep asking this question.

Heidegger, in *The Principle of Reason* argues that “the idea of ‘transfer’, and of metaphor rests on the distinction, if not the complete separation, of the sensible (*sinnlich*) from the non-sensible, as two self-sufficient realms” (148). Heidegger’s point is that it is the separation itself which created the problem but this outlook (this way of arranging phenomena around us, this sort of “metaphysics”) is so fundamentally grounded in our thinking that all the explanations we shall be trying to give for metaphor will always already carry this separation within themselves as well, so they will themselves inevitably be metaphorical: this is as if we were trying to cure the illness with the illness itself. Heidegger claims that our “metaphysics” (our approach to “what there is”, to “beings”) accepts as “real” almost exclusively only those things which are present (which we can see, touch, etc.), whereas the “unseen” is talked about as the “distant”, “the far-away”. Now this distinction *is* the separation on which “the metaphorical” depends; metaphor is a “natural state” for our thinking to such an extent that we shall never be able to go “beyond” it, to see it “better”, to have a look at it from “another perspective”, and thus all our explanations for metaphor are bound to be circular (147-148).

Derrida, in “White Mythology”, also claims that the language with which we describe the “conceptual”, the “unseen”, the “abstract” (for example, the concept called “metaphor”) is so much saturated with the “physical”, the “down-to-earth” that any explanation we pretend to be taking place on a “general” and “abstract” level will, in fact, heavily rely on the physical and thus, on the metaphorical (260-263). For example, there is the very word *concept*, which originally is ‘to take in’, or, for that matter, there is Hungarian *fog-alom*, which has to do with ‘clutching, grasping’ in the physical sense. To simplify: both philosophers claim that one of philosophy’s illusions is that it can reach a level of abstraction where we can “get rid of” metaphors; since, however, our thinking is metaphorical through and through (thinking, in a sense, *is* metaphor itself), we can only offer further metaphors to explain metaphors. Both Heidegger and Derrida represent the view that “everything is (or at least one day was) metaphor”, therefore metaphor, which is the main source of ambiguity in language, will constantly dismantle (deconstruct) our most cherished, “abstractly and unambiguously defined” concepts in the sense that the metaphorical “core” of the concept (its “original meaning”) will sometimes start a “small revolution” against the “plain” concepts (dead metaphors?) we think to be unequivocal; metaphor will make an “unambiguous” concept ambiguous. Heidegger and Derrida belong to that tradition which teaches that even plain (ordinary) language was once “poetry”.²

A second problem about metaphor is that later, in rhetorical handbooks and in stylistics, it becomes a “figure of speech”, a trope, a mere ornament, because it is seen as simply replacing an

² It is noteworthy that, in spite of some fundamental differences in the respective philosophical traditions and background assumptions, some tenets of Heidegger’s and Derrida’s position are in agreement with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the latter convincingly showing that most of our fundamental (highly abstract) concepts – such as *time, quantity, state, change, action, goal, manner, modality*, etc. – are metaphorical (Lakoff 1993: 212). I would like to thank the anonymous reader of this paper to point this out for me.

ordinary (literal) expression to make speech more “picturesque” (it is true that when Aristotle discusses metaphor, he also talks about *poetic diction*, as if it had its most important role in the language of poetry) (1982: 87). For a long time (practically up to the 1930s) metaphor was indeed “dormant” in stylistics – its immense significance for human thinking, and especially its heuristic value (that it guides discovery), was realised and generally accepted only around the middle of the 20th century. Even worse, metaphor will often be treated as an “elliptical or abbreviated” simile (*brevior similitudo* — Quintilian: *Institutio Oratoria*, Book VIII, 6) (Ricoeur 2003: 388), a collapsed comparison from which *like* or *as* has been omitted for convenience, or to heighten the effect of the expression (and it is also true that, as we saw, in the *Rhetoric* a significant parallel is established between metaphor and simile). But how should we account for similarity in the sentence, for example, *You are my sunshine*? Do I here *liken* you to sunshine? Or can we select the appropriate simile to the metaphor: *Oh, I am in seventh heaven when I am in Debrecen*? We can, of course, say “I am so happy that my state can be compared to (is like) the place I imagine to be seventh heaven” but still the simile cannot rest on “direct acquaintance” with heaven on the one hand, and “direct acquaintance” with another place (where I happen to be: in Debrecen), on the other. The metaphor rather depends on the system of “commonplace attributes” we usually associate with the word *heaven*, grounded in our cultural tradition. If, for example, I say *Peter is a lion* and I mean that Peter is ‘courageous, strong, faces difficulties’ etc., then I do not mind if zoologists find lions that run away in the face of danger, or they prove that lions are in fact shy, timid and gentle creatures. Metaphors (at least sometimes) work through similarities *as* cultural stereotypes rather than through “real” similarities.

Thus the major question becomes: how does similarity work in metaphor? This brings up the following, genuinely philosophical issue: do I look at the two things (e.g. Peter and the lion) one after the other and, when I perceive some similar features, connect the two? And, most importantly, do I (can I?) perceive the similarities independent of language? Or is similarity rather *created* in the very act of connecting them in the sentence? And if it is, shall we, especially in constructions of identification (such as *X is Y*), see *some* similarities even if “in fact” (in “reality”) there are not any? Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida* (Act III, Scene 3, lines 139-141)³ makes Ulysses tell Agamemnon:

- (1) Time hath, my lord,
 A wallet at his back, wherein he puts
 Alms for oblivion...

Had we been able to perceive any similarities between beggars and Time (a highly problematic, abstract concept) before we met Shakespeare’s metaphor? And do we see these similarities now?

Since Aristotle discusses transference in terms of shifts between genera and species, a further question arises, which also has to do with the relationship between language, the (extra-linguistic) world (“reality”) and thought. Aristotle’s account presupposes that things, even before language would start its metaphorical operations, are in already neatly classified systems (genera, species, etc.). So when Aristotle says that we “borrow” a term e.g. from the domain of species and use it as a genus (e.g. when we say *ten thousand* instead of *many*), he has to take it for granted that one is able to specify both the place of borrowing and the place of application. The problem here is that metaphor is often precisely the device to create *new* domains — they are employed to blur the edges of already existing categories. In “Metaphor and Symbol”, Paul Ricoeur says: “a metaphor is an instantaneous creation, a semantic

³ Shakespeare’s text is quoted according Shakespeare (1997).

innovation which has no status in already established language and which only exists because of the attribution of the unusual or the unexpected predicate” (1976: 52). So is there a pre-existing order in the world? Is it only when this order is set up that language (and metaphor) may start its operations? Or is that order created by language itself? And if the latter is true, can reference to “reality” be used to explain metaphor?

As we saw, Aristotle also makes a distinction between the strange (alien, *allogrios*) and the ordinary (current, generally accepted, *kurion*) application of terms. Thus the road is open to interpret metaphor as a kind of *deviation* from the norm, as the *violation* of common usage. The *Rhetoric* will also talk about the pleasant *surprise* we feel when we encounter metaphors. Jean Cohen – in *Structure de Langage Poétique* – claims that metaphors are not only *pertinent* but they are *im-pertinent* as well: in the first place, metaphor shocks, because there is kind of semantic “explosion” (to use another metaphor) which takes place as a result of the tension between two terms (1966: 50). Another way of putting this is to say that the two terms in a metaphor are like a reluctant pair of lovers, who are yoked together by the syntax of a sentence and finally one gives in, creating a stormy union (Ricoeur 1976: 56).

In theories of metaphor, the element of tension, shock or surprise is accounted for in basically two ways. Tension is interpreted as existing between the two terms; in the sentence *Richard’s heart is made of stone* the tension has to do with the fact that under the literal interpretation of the whole sentence, the sentence is simply *false*. This tells us to go to another ‘plain’ (into another domain) and look for another interpretation, where the sentence is no longer false and means something like ‘Richard is cruel, insensitive’, etc. There are problems, however, here, too. There are sentences which are plainly false and we would not like to call them metaphorical, e.g. *Debrecen is in the United States of America*. There are also so-called “negative sentences”, e.g. *The work of art is not an egg*, or *Life is not a bed of roses*, which are true literally but – at least in a certain sense – are metaphorical. Even further, it is not enough to take note of deviation because not all deviations will produce good metaphors. Is the sentence: *The number 13 is dangerous* a metaphor? If it is, is it a good one? Or *I have an unmarried shoelace*. It is not enough to claim that “a good metaphor for one is a bad metaphor for another”, because it is part of the phenomenon of metaphor that there is at least a large number of people (ideally the speaking community) who accept, acknowledge, and appreciate an utterance *as* metaphor.

Surprise, created by the pertinence of metaphor, plays an important role in the *interaction* view of metaphor, as Max Black famously claims in *Models and Metaphors* (1962: 25-47). There is a tension between the two terms, e.g. *Richard’s heart is stone* but *heart* and *stone* get “reconciled” and, finally, united in a *new* meaning as the terms mutually “recognise” and “realize” what they have in common. To explain this process, we analyse the terms, first independently, into semantic features, e.g. *Richard’s heart*: PART OF THE HUMAN BODY+THROBBING+SEAT OF LIFE/EMOTIONS, etc.; *stone*: INANIMATE+COLD+HARD, etc. but when the terms are yoked together, only the common (or at least the cognate) elements will mutually select one another and take part in the “reconciliation”. However, this “harmony” is a matter of how the semantic features have been selected. In the above example, for instance, it is only through knowing that emotions may be “warm” or “cold” that the terms seem to connect somehow but to talk about “cold” (or “warm”) emotions may already be metaphorical. It is also possible to argue that the tension is not (or not only) between the two terms in the sentence but between the “old”, literal meaning and the “new”, metaphorical one. This, first of all, presupposes the ability to clearly distinguish between literal and metaphorical meaning, and this is more often with than without problems. For John Searle, for example, meaning is literal (in *Meaning and Expression*) when, against a background of commonly shared assumptions, the meaning of the sentence and the intended meaning of the person who utters

the sentence, overlap (Searle 1979: 76-81). But what is the relationship between the literal and the metaphorical meaning? Does the metaphorical *retain* some elements of the literal? For Paul Ricoeur, this is the prerequisite of the functioning of metaphor: the metaphorical will constantly “reach back” to the literal and will create a *new* meaning on the “ruins” of the old one: one cannot appreciate time seen in terms of an old beggar if one does not know what a beggar “usually”, “generally” does. Now is there a genuinely new meaning or should we rather speak of the extension of the meaning of *beggar*? (Ricoeur 1976: 50)

Donald Davidson is (in)famously of the opinion that there is no “connection” between the literal and the metaphorical because there is no such thing as “metaphorical meaning”: metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more. “Metaphor runs on the same familiar linguistic tracks that the plainest sentences do; [...] What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use – in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticising” (1979: 259). Then what have metaphorical theories been talking about since Aristotle? Davidson claims that they describe the *effects* metaphors have on us. Metaphors do not have a specific, or separable, or distinguishable *cognitive content*; the common mistake is to read the contents of the thoughts metaphors provoke in us into the metaphor itself. “A metaphor does its work through other intermediaries” (262).

Where, in spite of the considerable differences, a “common denominator” seems to emerge is – as Aristotle already pointed out – in metaphors coming to our aid when we need a single term for a thing that has hitherto been described through circumlocution, i.e. in a clumsy, roundabout way (Sowing *the god-created fire*). Metaphor is able to fill a semantic *lacuna* (gap). Yet this leads to the substitution view of metaphor: if it can replace a lengthy description, then this surely works the other way round, too. Is it possible to paraphrase metaphors without any loss in meaning? Sometimes this seems to be the case; *Peter is a lion* may not be saying much more than ‘Peter is brave’. But could we paraphrase

- (2) Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back
 Wherein he puts alms for oblivion

claiming that “time is *like* a beggar who, bit by bit, makes us forget things”? Surely, this “translation” has something to do with Ulysses’ (Shakespeare’s) lines on the cognitive level but where is the consistency in the inner structure which connects the – unsaid – beggar with the alms? Or should we rather say that we may think of Time (already personified?) as a beggar because the word *alms* implies this? And what is the semantic value of using *oblivion* instead of *forgetting*, *wallet* instead of *backpack*; what is the role of our knowledge of beggars and alms (e.g. that they are typically gathered gradually, not “in one sum”) in the appreciation of this image? Is it important that this makes Time poor? Or are *we* poor because we (our deeds, who we are) are gradually forgotten (by others, by the world)?

Aristotle, as we saw, also noticed that metaphor is able to depict the abstract in concrete (“tangible”) terms, it can carry the *logical* moment of proportionality (metaphor by analogy, the fourth) and the sensible moment of “figurativity”. This is why Heidegger, Derrida or Ricoeur celebrate metaphor as the vehicle of discovery: in (through) metaphor, the invisible appears through the visible, we can see human phenomena such as time *as if* it were in a state of *activity*. Metaphor is the means to dismantle the dead, *thingly*, categorical, fixed character of objects, ideas and concepts by making them *do* something, by almost forcing them to perform actions. Metaphor does not only *describe* reality, it also *creates* it, it *animates* it. And by showing (at least sometimes) the alien in terms of the familiar (through something we can *relate to*, especially because of the physical closeness present in the almost “tangible” scene

metaphor sets before our eyes), metaphor may give us the impression of familiarity, or call our attention to unfamiliarity through some – familiar – indirect connection. Metaphor is *seeing* (something) *as*: metaphor brings us into proximity with things which, for example in their abstraction, seem to be distant; metaphor is thus able to tell us *how* we are in the world. *Seeing-as* may become *being-as* (Ricoeur 2003: 351).

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