

A Pragmatic Theory of Metaphors: Beyond the Cognitive

STERLING HOWARD

In grade school, I learned what a metaphor was: a simile without “like” or “as.” Even then, that definition made no sense to me. I remember asking my teacher, “If a metaphor and simile do the same thing, why do we spend so much time trying to separate them in class?” My teacher brushed off my question by reiterating the syntactic differences between the two, and I was left unsatisfied. Now, many years later, I still hold that my question was interesting and meaningful.

There is a surprising range of theories about metaphors. The issue stems from the simple fact that metaphors are non-literal. When I tell someone, “You are a star,” I do not intend for them to think I am calling them a huge, radioactive ball of burning gas. A competent English speaker would not assume I mean anything remotely similar to that. In determining what metaphors are, the first question is how are metaphors identified as such, and the second is what metaphors mean.

A large emphasis is placed on the similarities and differences between similes and metaphors. Compared to similes, metaphors are much more complicated to explain. When I say “*P* is like *Q*,” I mean that *P* is like *Q* in certain respects. The relation-type between the terms is made explicit by “like.” Still, it seems most metaphors can be described

Sterling Howard is a senior double majoring in psychology and philosophy at Brigham Young University. He plans on pursuing a PhD in psychology. Sterling is interested in philosophy of mind, epistemology, and philosophy of science as well as other topics that intersect with psychology.

in simile-adjacent ways. "Today was a nightmare!" means something like "Today was like a nightmare."

So how do similes and metaphors relate? There are two general categories of theories on this matter: (1) metaphors are similes in ellipses or entail similes and, (2) similes are like metaphors in some vague respects, but metaphors *are not* similes. Each of these theory-types excels in explaining a part of metaphors, but each has critical weaknesses. Type-1 theories explain how we can easily translate metaphors into roughly equal similes, but they fall short in explaining what is lost in the translation and why some metaphors fail to produce adequate similes. For example, the superficial translation of "Gunther is cool" into a simile produces "It is like Gunther is cool." This simile is an uncanny doppelgänger of the metaphor. Type-2 theories, on the other hand, can easily explain why this loss occurs in translation. Donald Davidson (1978) holds that metaphors are a unique component of language that produce comparisons which can only be explained functionally, meaning that a metaphor is a metaphor because of how it is used. John Searle holds that metaphors use an array of heuristics and culturally-sensitive associative techniques to translate "*P* is *Q*" into "*P* is *R*," though it is unclear what *R* is in Searle's theory. This is the major flaw of type-2 theories: they explain that there is a relation, but they either fail to comprehensively describe how the relation is formed or what, precisely, is being related.

I take the middle ground. I argue that the relation between terms in a metaphor contain the same relations found in similes pragmatically, but there is a major emotional component that drives metaphor use. Most analyses of metaphors have occurred in the realm of pure cognitive relations between terms, but I will expand my analysis into affect. In doing this, I will first argue that the semantic meaning of a metaphor is its literal meaning and that its metaphorical meaning is evaluated pragmatically. I will then argue that similes and metaphors carry the same methods of cognitive association between terms. Finally, I will show that metaphors are unique in their transference of an affective tie between its terms.

A Semantic Theory of Metaphors

The metaphorical meaning of a metaphor is often taken to be its semantic meaning. This is plausible for two reasons: (1) "the metaphorical meaning of a metaphor" seems tautological, and (2) any other derivable meaning from a metaphor is usually made in bad faith or clearly not what the metaphor meant. John Searle (1993) takes this very position

by claiming that context heavily influences semantic meaning. He gives examples such as “Jane is tall” and asks how you can figure out what “tall” means semantically without context. Tall is a relational attribute, such that I can be tall compared to an ant, average for a human, and short compared to buildings. However, even if this were true, it is wrong to assume that semantic meanings are so context sensitive that they can extract a non-literal semantic meaning from a metaphor.

Contradictions of Dual/Changeable-semantic Meanings

A theory of the meaning of metaphors cannot sacrifice the literal meaning of a metaphor as the semantic meaning. The mechanism for identifying the statement *S*, “Jane is a night owl,” as a metaphor is to understand that Jane is not a literal night owl (let this be represented by $\neg\phi$) and that *S* absurdly claims that Jane is a literal night owl (ϕ). Thus, I have placed myself in a position to evaluate *S* as a metaphor and learn that *S* means ψ according to Searle. However, in doing so, I identified that the statement was claiming that ϕ in some capacity. In other words, I identified that *S* meant something other than its metaphorical meaning. There is no such thing as pre-semantic meaning, so ϕ is, at least, one of the semantic meanings of *S*.

Unfortunately, there can be only one semantic meaning of a metaphor. If there were multiple semantic meanings for a metaphor, they would often be self-contradictory. If I say, “My mind is blown,” the literal meaning is that my head exploded or blew apart, but I metaphorically mean something akin to my mind (while intact) learned some new, interesting information. In instances such as these, producing a metaphor would be the same as introducing the claim that everything is true (by *ex falso quodlibet*) or, at the very least, that the metaphor could not be evaluated with a truth value at all. Obviously, I do not imply that everything is true when I say “My mind is blown,” nor have I said something that cannot be evaluated with a truth condition because in telling you that, you learn something about me. If there cannot be multiple semantic meanings of metaphors, there are limited options to rectify the situation to make a metaphorical meaning be a metaphor’s semantic meaning.

Returning to the example of “Jane is a night owl” (*S*) and its semantic meaning ϕ , one could claim that what is occurring is a recursive revision of meaning. Upon synthesizing my knowledge of $\neg\phi$ with the semantic meaning of *S*, I determine that ϕ is an invalid semantic meaning of *S*. Thus, ϕ could have never been the meaning of *S* at the time of my original evaluation, and the one true meaning is

ψ after I evaluate S as a metaphor. But if ϕ could have never been the meaning of S , I have just lost all grounds for my original determination that S is a metaphor. I was mistaken to think there was any dissonance in the statement, so whatever mechanism let me assume ψ from S was semantically illegal because I should not have identified S as a metaphor to begin with. In addition, some statements rely on both a metaphorical and non-metaphorical interpretation. Suppose I work in animal control and I see someone committing the heinous crime of loitering. In my zealous love for the law, I decide to perform a citizen's arrest. I tell my friend, "I'm going to take care of that pest." In order to appreciate my incredibly clever wordplay, the non-metaphorical meaning of my statement has to remain intact in some respect.

Similarly, I could claim that at first S did mean ϕ , but upon realizing I was mistaken through synthesis with my knowledge of $\neg\phi$, the meaning of S changed to ψ after evaluating it as a metaphor. However, a meaning is not a temporally-bound object, so it cannot itself change, only be exchanged. That is to say that it only seems that meanings can change via new interpretations, but that is to bestow a new meaning to the sentence, not change the content of the old meaning. Even if meanings themselves could change, the fact that I believe that the evaluation of S as meaning ϕ was mistaken makes me vulnerable to every objection I listed for a recursive revision of meaning.

Even if we depart from Searle's assumptions about the nature of metaphors, we still cannot produce semantic metaphorical meanings. Any theory at all that requires a metaphor to be identified as such due to the absurdity of the literal meaning of the statement itself falls prey to the same arguments.

Non-standard Definitions

An interesting case that may be immune to my previous objections is that of metaphors being statements invoking non-standard definitions of words.¹ For example, if I say, "The stage of my mind," we would take "stage" to have a definition referring to conscious attention. But metaphors cannot behave like this for the very simple reason that words cannot have near-infinite definitions that scale with the amount of possible metaphors. In addition, many metaphors are never heard before. For example, "This energy drink was made in a fluid catalytic

¹ See Davidson (1978) for a more in-depth dismantling of this theory.

cracking unit's reactor." I assume this has never been said before, and, furthermore, that most of my readers are not familiar with fluid catalytic cracking (FCC) but know that energy drinks are not made with FCC—whatever that is. But upon learning that a FCC unit produces petroleum products, you understand without me producing another definition of FCC units that I think my energy drink tastes horrible. It would be plausible to claim that I am dynamically creating a new definition out of my need to interpret the statement as a metaphor, but in order to do that, I would have to first identify the statement as a metaphor by using the same mechanisms that Searle deploys.

Thus, we see that the only semantic meaning of a metaphor is its literal meaning. To say "The volcano gave itself a bad haircut" is to semantically mean that the volcano tried and failed to cut its hair, not that when it exploded its top looked strange. To say, "My girlfriend is my everything" is to semantically mean that my girlfriend fills the immensity of all modal space, not that she is very important to me. This is not to accept metaphor nihilism where metaphors cannot mean anything other than what they superficially mean. When we are told in grade school, "Metaphors say one thing but mean another," the first instance is its literal meaning (evaluated semantically), and the second is the speaker's intended meaning (evaluated pragmatically).

A Pragmatic Theory of Metaphors

A metaphor is recognized by the audience as such because the statement is absurdly true or false (Davidson 1978). Even when the metaphor makes no sense, an individual can recognize that what was said was not meant to be taken literally. Suppose I declare, "Juliet is Plank's constant." My bamboozled audience would then ask, "What do you mean?" However, if taken literally, the assumption would be that I am either insane or have an aphasia; there is no way that a person could be a physical constant used to describe quantum physics. But the base-rate assumption of my audience is that I am being cooperative in the conversation, and so I must be presenting my audience with an implicature, even if they cannot discern what it would be. Every metaphor consists of breaking the maxim of quantity, such as in "No man is an island," or the maxim of quality, such as in "You are a star" (Davidson 1978). The more unclearly a statement breaks a maxim of conversation, the more unsure my audience will be that I am presenting them with a metaphor precisely because a cooperative audience should not privilege a metaphorical interpretation so highly when the semantic interpretation of the statement is reasonable.

At this point, I have only presented a method of delineating metaphors from non-metaphors, but what metaphors pragmatically mean is still unclear. I will first delve into the much discussed correlation between metaphors and similes, and then I will continue on into the affective dimension of metaphors.

Translation Into Simile

When anyone is asked what a metaphor means, oftentimes the individual will translate the metaphor into a simile. “Gunther is the sun” roughly means the same thing as “Gunther is like the sun.” Yet the translation is imperfect. I understand that saying “Gunther is the sun” has something to do with the attributes that Gunther has in common with the sun, but that sort of relation is not all the metaphor is, at least intuitively. As stated before, there are two schools of thought on metaphors’ relations to similes: (1) metaphors are (or indicate) similes, or (2) metaphors are similar to similes but function differently in creating a relation between terms. The latter opinion is tempting because it easily explains why similes and metaphors feel different: a metaphor is made of higher-grade or more complex relations than similes.

Searle claims that the relation between terms in a metaphor are not the same as a simile. Instead, metaphors take “ P is Q ” and transform it into “ P is R ” through a multiplicity of associative practices steeped in cultural and linguistic norms. To defend this, he brings forward the claim that some metaphors cannot be translated into similes. Consider the metaphor, “Sally’s attitude was cold.” We certainly accept that temperature is an appropriate metaphor for attitudes, but it isn’t clear that we can produce an appropriate simile comparison between Sally’s attitude and coldness. Likewise, Searle argues that we often associate time with spatial components such as when we say, “Time flew by.” Just as in the attitude and temperature case, we have two components of a metaphor that we struggle to produce an adequate simile for: time and motion through space.² Searle believes this shows that these metaphors have a special non-simile relation anchored in or supported by cultural acceptance.

I believe these problematic metaphors can be translated as chained similes. In the case of “Sally’s attitude was cold,” the reasoning is as follows: if you are emotionally close to a person, you are going to become physically closer. If you reject someone who you are close to, you often

² Let us ignore for a moment that modern physicists consider spacetime to be a single continuum.

distance yourself proportionally. In close relationships, we hug, kiss, and snuggle—sharing body heat. Thus, the chained simile is as follows: “Sally’s emotional distance is like and/or is associated with a physical distance, and this physical distance is like coldness.”

The case of “Time flew by” also can be translated with a chained simile. Motion is a change in space over time. Greater speed implies a larger change in a shorter amount of time. If time is compressed, then motion also occurs faster. In addition, we have to realize that the individual is speaking about their perception of the time and not objective time. Thus, the metaphor can be translated as, “The perceived time that passed was like actual time compressed, which is like flight.”

In both these instances, it seems absurd to expect (or assume) that anyone will produce a chain of thoughts like this in order to interpret these or similar metaphors. These nested similes only function to justify the metaphor, but they are not used in a pedestrian interpretation of it. A chain of similes was used—consciously or subconsciously—to create these types of metaphors, and that is enough for my theory. When this sort of metaphor is used, there is not a special type of cognitive relation at play, but there is another sort of non-cognitive relation that can justify their use. As I will show, implying a simile is not always the central goal of a metaphor, nor is a metaphor interpreted as a strict simile-like relation, however integral this type of relation is to most metaphors’ functioning.

Affective Ties

To take a page out of Wittgenstein’s book, to understand what a metaphor is, we need to first observe how it is used. In other words, why is a simile or an explicit attribution of characteristics inadequate in certain places? For example, Shakespeare writes in *Macbeth*,

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry Hold, hold! (2017, 1.5.55)

Obviously, Shakespeare cannot hold a light to my own poetic genius, which is more propositionally accurate in fewer words. To re-write this portion of Lady Macbeth’s monologue: “I want night to come and be really dark and misty so no one notices me when I go on my secret murder quest.”

In all seriousness, there seems to be some affective component of this passage carried, in part, by the vehicle of metaphors that gives Shakespeare’s poetry more power than my literal interpretation. The audience *feels*

something. This makes sense, as a metaphor is a literary device. It is not meant to accurately describe some proposition with rigor and exactness, nor is its purpose to be inexact and sloppy. Like poetry (and often featured in poetry), metaphors are meant to carry affective power. If, at this point, it is not clear that this is a part of a metaphor's goal, we must at least admit that metaphors do affect attitude. A brief survey over the relevant psychological literature supports this. Describing depression with positive metaphors (e.g., "a journey with some difficulties") as opposed to negative metaphors (e.g., "a thick darkness") can significantly impact psychological resilience (Hauser & Schwarz 2015). Another study found that positively framed metaphors for the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened emotional resilience for healthcare workers while negatively framed metaphors degraded it (Baranowski et al. 2024). Clearly there is some affective element to metaphors, and this is no surprise: it has been commonly held that words and statements refer both to cognitive and affective content.

In the world of literature, the affective content of a word is often referred to as connotation (White 2017).³ For example, "mutt" has a negative connotation while "doggy" has a positive one. However, the term "connotation" is too inconsistently defined in the literary milieu and too insufficient to capture the whole affective content of words and statements. In psychology, an affect can be mapped to a coordinate in multidimensional emotional-space (Harmon-Jones et al. 2013). At the very least, the dimensions are valence, arousal, and motivational intensity. Literary connotation only tracks valence. In "Gunther is a pig," one does not simply feel positively or negatively, but feels subtle disgust toward Gunther. Metaphors contain more than connotation; they also have affective ties.⁴

Metaphors' and Similes' Affective Ties

Now, consider the difference between the metaphor "Gunther is a pig" (M) and the simile "Gunther is like a pig" (S). In M, one feels

³ Note that this is different from the Fregian connotation and denotation.

⁴ In claiming that words and statements have affective ties, I am presupposing the theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2017). Instead of being discrete kinds, emotions are categorized in language and thought according to gerrymandered regions of emotional space. This fits nicely with my theory, as many affective states, especially those derived from low-arousing language use, are subtle and difficult to verbalize. However, it is likely that this same theory can be described using traditional emotion theory as there could be precise alchemical mixtures of core emotions to produce these subtle states.

subtle disgust towards Gunther as if he were a pig. However, in S, one only feels disgust towards Gunther because of the affective ties of the similarities arising from the simile: he is dirty, smelly, etc. This makes sense, considering the differences in construction between M and S. The terms in S are buffered by “like,” but they are more clearly related in M. To say “Gunther is a pig” is to semantically say Gunther is a pig. It is putting forward the proposition that Gunther belongs to the set of pigs. Now, Gunther obviously fails to fulfil whatever the necessary and sufficient conditions of being a pig are. Certainly he has some things in common with being a pig; otherwise, the metaphor would probably fail. The goal in stating M is to have you consider Gunther as if he were a pig, not in imagining him being quadrupedal and oinking, but in how you feel about him. Likewise, “She is a mouse” translates better to “She has the aura of a mouse” than “She is like a mouse,” though even that translation does not do the metaphor justice. Certainly I make the original claim due to the shared class of features between the girl in question and the mouse, but I don’t have the main goal to promote the shared, individual features. Instead, I want to relate that the girl gives me the same impression as a mouse does. The simile-like relation is noted subconsciously, and it leads to the production of the metaphor, but I primarily care about the overall affective effect of the metaphor.

The affective tie used in any metaphor is driven by context. To continue the trend of animal metaphors, “You’re a puppy” could mean different things in different situations. If a little girl tells someone that, the meaning would probably include a positive affective tie: the girl’s metaphor portrays puppies as a cute and loveable creature. If someone says, “You’re a puppy,” to their partner in disgust, the metaphor invokes the portrayal of a puppy as a helpless and weak creature. To depart from animal metaphors, “This computer is a brick” could refer to a brick as being something that is solidly built, or something that has no internal functionality. Note that the affective tie is not derived from the cluster of relevant attributes, but the portrayal is determined by the affective tie it is derived from. The context and relevant attributes determine the specific affective portrayal of a puppy to transfer onto the person, as does the specific affective portrayal of a brick onto the computer. This is why the corresponding similes also have similar but not exact meanings. In the case of a metaphor, the simile relation serves to justify the transfer of the affective tie. If the simile relation is false within the context set, then the metaphor is evaluated as false because there is insufficient (or incorrect) reason to feel the same way about both terms in the metaphor.

This affective component explains why some metaphors function but their superficial simile correlatives struggle to convey something true. Take

“This energy drink is fire!” (M) and compare it to “This energy drink is like fire!” (S). In the case of S, I am inviting my audience to find correlations between the energy drink and fire typical of similes. In M, I am primarily inviting my audience to correlate the emotional effect of drinking an energy drink to the awe and power of beholding fire. Certainly those feelings arise from a simile-type relation, but the metaphor makes the affective tie the relevant feature. To say S is to say the energy drink is hot, burning, bright, or otherwise painful. S would not be understood or evaluated as true, but it is clear that M would be, provided I am drinking a good energy drink of course. The affective tie of M is true, and the simile-type relations that are relevant to the affective tie are deemed to be most salient due to the cultural use of such metaphors, and are thus sufficient to produce the metaphor.

Varieties of Metaphors

Many discussions of metaphors focus primarily on intuitive ones. As we saw from Searle, when we consider odd metaphors, sometimes theories break. Below I have considered a variety of metaphor types and how they function under my theory.

Simile-proof Metaphors

Consider again how “It is like Gunther’s attitude is cold” fails to capture the meaning behind “Gunther’s attitude is cold.” There is no explicit similarity between coldness and Gunther’s attitude, so the simile fails. However, the metaphor does not aim to establish a connection in the way the simile does; rather, the speaker presupposes that the audience will accept the sublimation of the affective ties of coldness onto Gunther’s attitude. In short, the metaphor does not need to be justified, so the interlocutors can ignore the cognitive relations between terms characteristic of a simile.

One-term and Meta Metaphors

Up to this point, the metaphors I have used have followed the pattern of “P is Q.” However, sometimes a metaphor only explicitly carries one term of comparison, such as in “Millions of bright eyes stared down from the sky.” Much like simple metaphors, the audience recognizes that this statement involves metaphors due to the violation of the Gricean maxims. However, upon realizing there is a metaphor, the audience must seek out the object we are comparing to the scene. Once identified,

the interpretation of the metaphor continues as in simple metaphors. The inferred object then obtains the affective tie of the object explicitly described in the metaphor. The same is true for meta-metaphors which compare one metaphor to another such as "The mutt is a pig," where "The mutt" refers to someone I dislike and not an actual dog.

Negative Metaphors

In saying, "No person is an island," I mean something like, "No one is completely alone." We recognize this as a metaphor because it is so obviously true, and so there has to be some other meaning than its semantic one (Davidson, 1978). Because of the negation, the metaphor is evaluated using a relevant difference rather than similarity. In effect, it is to say that the relevant affective tie of an island is inappropriate to transfer onto anyone.

Dynamic Metaphors

Sometimes metaphors include novel objects of comparisons that the audience has never considered before, and thus does not yet have a pre-packaged affective tie to transfer. Consider: "The lollipops were made out of adulterated cement and the tears of children." If you had never considered candy made out of cement and tears, you would not have automatically known how to feel. But the individual can know how they should feel through developing an affective tie for the novel object of comparison in the moment.

Tautological Metaphors

Some writers consider statements like, "It is what it is," or "Life is life" to be metaphors due to their violation of the maxim of quantity (Davidson 1978). However, these statements are not meant to draw similarities between the object and the object of comparison, seeing as they are both the same. Instead, the purpose is to emphasize and ground reality. In saying, "It is what it is," I mean to say that I ought to accept the state of affairs as they are. In saying, "Life is life," I mean something similar, that I was dealt a hand of cards and have to live with it, so to speak. Tautological metaphors do not exist.

Literal Metaphors

The standard conception of a metaphor is something that is literally false but true in another sense. However, this is not always the case. Suppose

I am in a paint store, perusing different colors of paint for my living room. I happen upon a brand that puts a sticker at the bottom of each can that says, "Green." Now, not all of these paint cans are filled with green paint. What the sticker means is that the paint is sustainably sourced and not harmful to the environment. However, some of the cans are filled with green paint. So, the statement "The paint is green" is both semantically and metaphorically true for those cans. However, I am invited to feel the way I feel towards green in the context of sustainability towards the paint despite it being literally true that the paint is green. Literal metaphors invite us to regard one portrayal of the second term in the metaphor as salient and transfer its affective tie onto the first despite both terms in the metaphor semantically referring to the same thing.⁵

Conclusion

In this essay, I have given a theory for metaphors that I believe adequately explains metaphors' use and make-up. Firstly, I maintained the literal meaning of a metaphor as its semantic meaning because if there were multiple semantic meanings of a metaphor, then problematic contradictions would arise. Secondly, I evaluated the metaphorical meaning of a metaphor as purely pragmatic. Thirdly, I avowed that where there is a cognitive relation between terms in a metaphor, the cognitive relation is the same type of relation that is used by a simile. Finally, I proposed that metaphors function as they do due to the transference of an affective tie between terms.

Perhaps there is still something missing in explaining the effects of metaphors. However, there is a fine line between what a metaphor does to a person's psyche and what it means. There can certainly be intended effects, but those intended effects are not a metaphor's meaning. This is why throughout the paper I have been discussing affective ties and not affect itself. The affective tie can belong to a word, but the affect belongs to the audience. Metaphors are on the boundary of the philosophy of language. They are made of language, but what they do to a mind is more in the realm of psychology.

⁵ It should be noted that literal metaphors are not what I called tautological metaphors: literal metaphors happen to be literally true, but tautological metaphors (which do not exist) are meant to be pragmatically comparing the same object to itself in the same sense.

Works Cited

- Baranowski, Andreas M., et al. "‘We Are All in the Same Boat’: A Qualitative Cross-Sectional Analysis of COVID-19 Pandemic Imagery in Scientific Literature and Its Use for People Working in the German Healthcare Sector." *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, vol. 15, 2024.
- Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1978, pp. 31-47.
- Harmon-Jones, Eddie, Philip A. Gable, and Tom F. Price. "Does Negative Affect Always Narrow and Positive Affect Always Broaden the Mind? Considering the Influence of Motivational Intensity on Cognitive Scope." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2013, pp. 301-7.
- Hauser, David J., and Norbert Schwarz. "The War on Prevention: Bellicose Cancer Metaphors Hurt (Some) Prevention Intentions." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 66-77.
- Lisa Feldman Barrett. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*. Mariner Books, p. 201.
- Searle, John R. "Metaphor." In *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony, Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Shakespeare, William, Shane Barnes, and Aidan Coleman. *William Shakespeare’s Macbeth*. Cheltenham, Victoria Insight Publications, 2017.
- White, Peter A. *Psychological Metaphysics*. Routledge, 2017.

