

Intermittent-Cognitivism and Metaphors

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Debate of the Meaning of Metaphors

Metaphors are ubiquitous in our language. So much so, we often use metaphors without being fully aware that we are using them. (i) The number 3 is *higher* than the number 2, (ii) we *hit* traffic on the way home, (iii) Hud's lecture *flew* by, (iv) I'll be studying in the days *ahead*, (v) the 8:00 AM exam is my *morning coffee*. Each of these is a metaphor which gives us a way to understand and communicate abstract and complex concepts, such as numbers and time (in a spatial and physical sense), share perceptual experiences and events, or evoke imagery. Metaphors, importantly, flourish language, provide new perspectives for thinking about subjects, and give us cognitive conceptual frameworks for understanding and defining abstract and complex ideas. It is these features that give the debate of the meaning of metaphor its prominence in the philosophy of language.

So what then, exactly, is the function of metaphor? And further, how do metaphors carry the meanings they have? Is the meaning of a metaphor given by a corresponding simile? Do metaphors have both a literal linguistic meaning, that is "a word, phrase, or sentence has linguistic meaning just

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in case it has a relatively stable capacity to be used for saying things,” in addition to a metaphorical meaning (Green, 5)? Do they pragmatically imply another proposition based on speaker meaning and intentions, as in “one entity or process has a feature that is intentionally designed by an agent to carry information about a distinct entity or process,” or are metaphors something else all together (Green, 5)? There are many views of how metaphors carry meaning, and arguments for and against these views. My aim in this paper is to provide insight into this debate, and to propose a meaning of metaphor which solves a problem with the Davidsonian view (*roughly*: the literal interpretation of the words in a metaphor constitute its meaning), while appealing to the issues which motivate Davidson’s view.

Intermittent-Cognitivist Thesis

Davidson’s view of the meaning of metaphors fails with respect to an examination of metaphors that arise in discourse relating to some abstract and complex concepts and perceptual experiences. For example, if I am discussing defining features of the number system and I say metaphor (i), the number 3 is *higher* than the number 2, I am clearly not saying that the number 3 is spatially above the number 2. There is a specific intended meaning which is not the literal interpretation of the metaphor. I will expand more on why this shows a failure in Davidson’s view later. A revised meaning of metaphor, one that accounts for this observation while still appealing to the arguments Davidson makes in favor of his view, is needed to adequately satisfy the epistemic problem of knowing speaker intentions, in cases of poetic metaphor, and the worry of limiting poetic metaphor to speaker meaning. I propose that the signification of metaphor has two distinct theses which create a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. (I) Metaphors have both a linguistic meaning and an intended speaker, meaning if and only if the metaphor is *prima facie* a pragmatic metaphor (*roughly*, a metaphor uttered with the intent of precisely conveying a conceptual idea or perceptual experience). In other words, pragmatic metaphors induce cognitive propositions. Moreover, in partial accordance with the Davidsonian view (II) metaphors have only linguistic meaning and provide new perspectives in thinking about a subject if and only if the metaphor is used in a more intentionally metaphorically descriptive, imagery inducing, or poetic manner, i.e., poetic metaphors are not truth apt.

Types of Metaphor

Certain sorts of metaphors are often necessary to talk, write, and understand abstract concepts and complex ideas. Let's call these types of metaphors pragmatic metaphors. Examples of pragmatic metaphors include: (i) the number 3 is *higher* than the number 2, (ii) we *hit* traffic on the way home, (iii) Hud's lecture *flew* by, and (iv) I'll be studying in the days *ahead*. When a speaker utters a metaphor of this type, their initial intent is not to consciously draw attention to the similarities between the two domains in the metaphor, but rather to describe or define an abstract concept or perceptual experience in a way that will be conceptualized and understood by their interlocutor. The abstract concepts referred to in these examples of pragmatic metaphors are (i) defining the organization of numbers, (ii) communicating the experience of coming upon an event or occurrence, (iii) defining an experience of time, and (iv) defining how we think of the organization of time in a spatial sense. There is still, of course, a literal meaning that can be drawn from pragmatic metaphors by analyzing the domains of the terms and individual meanings of words. However, what is important is the speaker's initial intent in uttering the metaphor, and their interlocutors initial understanding of the abstract content.

The other type of metaphor discussed here of importance to the intermittent-cognitivist thesis is the poetic sense. This sort of metaphor more intentionally draws a relation between two or more distinct subjects, entities, processes, etc., in order to display similarities between them, for the sake of intently evoking imagery in their interlocutor. An example of this sort of metaphor is (v) the 8:00 AM exam is my *morning coffee*. In this sort of metaphor, the precise and intended similarities between the domains is not known immediately by the listener, and further interpretation by the listener is natural and encouraged. In this case, there may not be a single intended meaning of how an early exam is like a morning cup of coffee, however, what is important is that there are similarities between these two domains which the listener of the metaphor deciphers to gain meaning.

The Davidsonian and the Pragmatic View

To see how these two types of metaphor I laid out affect the function of metaphor, let's first discuss Grice's, Lakoff's, and Davidson's views. Grice's intention based theory reduces linguistic meaning to speaker meaning in order to propose a theory for how words get the meanings they have. Grice, in accordance with his view of conversational implicature and

the intention based theory, suggests that since there are cases of metaphors which are clearly false on a literal level (such as metaphor (v) above), it cannot be the linguistic meaning that the speaker intends to get across (Grice, 53). It then follows that all metaphors have a speaker-intended meaning, as the linguistic meaning reduces to a speaker intention, and a true proposition is derived from the pragmatic implicature. This view more or less corresponds to a general pragmatic view which states metaphors have a single meaning, the ordinary linguistic meaning; however, they can be used to pragmatically imply something else.

Also in correspondence with the pragmatic view, Lakoff and Johnson's theories of conceptual metaphor suggest that metaphors have a sense or meaning beyond the literal. In *Metaphors We Live By*, the authors point out that there exist concepts of experience that require metaphors to be defined. Lakoff argues that much of our understanding of complex concepts, cognitively speaking, rely on metaphors.

We are proposing that the concepts that occur in metaphorical definitions are those that correspond to natural kinds of experience. Judging by the concepts that are defined by the metaphors we have uncovered so far, the following would be examples of concepts for natural kinds of experience in our culture: love, time, ideas, understanding, arguments, labor, happiness, health, control, status, morality, etc. These are concepts that require metaphorical definition, since they are not clearly enough delineated in their own terms to satisfy the purposes of our day-to-day functioning

(Lakoff and Johnson, 118).

The fact that definitions, and further, our cognitive conceptualizations of some concepts and perceptual experiences, rely on metaphors as thought and argued by Lakoff and Johnson, implies that these metaphors accomplish more than mean only the literal. In order for definitions to be extrapolated from metaphors, the metaphors must convey meaning and pragmatically imply something beyond the literal sense. The reason for this will be further expanded upon in the discussion of how pragmatic metaphors convey more than the linguistic meaning.

In opposition to Grice, Lakoff, and Johnson, and therefore the pragmatic view that metaphors can imply further propositions, Davidson argues that metaphors have a single meaning, that being the ordinary linguistic meaning, and do not pragmatically imply further propositions based on a speaker's intentions. "Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (Davidson,

32). Rather, when a speaker utters a metaphor, they provide a new perspective for thinking about a subject, cause their interlocutor to consider the similarities that are being drawn, and induce mental imagery in the visual or tactile sense. Davidson worries that saying a metaphor implies a further proposition limits the metaphor to speaker intentions. The central motivation for Davidson lies in his rejection that metaphors produce cognitive content that the speaker intends to convey. This is in direct conflict with Lakoff's theory. In order to make Lakoff's theory and Davidson's view compatible, my revised meaning of metaphor below appeals to Davidson's motivation through the poetic type of metaphor, while the pragmatic type of metaphor corresponds to what Lakoff has in mind.

Revised Meaning of Metaphor; Intermittent-Cognitivism

Metaphors, strictly speaking, accomplish more than merely provide a new perspective for thinking about a subject. With an appeal to intuition, when a speaker utters a pragmatic metaphor, their interlocutor understands the meaning as a pragmatic implicature. The interlocutor does not need to search for possible meanings by questioning what the similarities are between the conceptual domains. It also does not necessarily cause the interlocutor to think of the subject in a new manner. Instead, the interlocutor *prima facie* understands the meaning beyond the literal linguistic meaning, as precisely the perceptual experience or abstract idea that the speaker intends to convey.

This suggests that rather than metaphors having only a linguistic meaning, they also have a pragmatic speaker meaning (to be precise, in cases when the type of metaphor is of the pragmatic sense) in accordance with Grice's theory of conversational implicature and his intention based theory, analogous to other propositions which have speaker meaning. A metaphor, insofar as it corresponds to the pragmatic type, conveys a conceptual understanding of the abstract concept or of a perceptual experience as *intended* by the speaker, which implies that the metaphor has a meaning that is *not* only the linguistic meaning. This is contrary to Davidson's view that metaphors mean "nothing more" than the literal sense.

Take, for example, metaphor (i) the number 3 is *higher* than the number 2. It is not true that the number 3 is literally higher in a spatial sense than the number 2. This is just how we conceptualize and discuss numbers – we understand them as a sequence of values or as groups – and any interlocutor familiar with the abstract concept of numbers will

understand the speaker's intention that "higher" refers to the position in the sequence of values, rather than the literal meaning, that being spatially above.

There is meaning to the metaphor beyond the literal meaning, and the metaphor succeeds not because it causes a listener to evoke imagery. In fact, when a speaker utters this metaphor, they do not at all usually intend to evoke this sort of spatial imagery I brought to attention. Rather the speaker's intent is to say something about the defining characteristics of numbers and the relations between them, and the speaker's interlocutor recognizes the intent of defining the abstract concept. Thus, what is understood by the speaker uttering this metaphor denotes a pragmatic implicative meaning to an interlocutor familiar with the language. In this case, there is speaker meaning *beyond* the literal. Since this is true for other similar metaphors as well, I am arguing that a defining criteria of metaphor is that necessarily, this sort of metaphor, pragmatic, has both speaker meaning and linguistic meaning.

Now, contrast this with metaphor (v) the 8:00 AM exam is my *morning coffee*. In this case, it is more obvious that the 8:00 AM exam is not literally my scalding hot boost of caffeine in the morning which starts my day; however, there are similarities between the two which make the metaphor successful. Now, in accordance with Davidson, there may not be a specific pragmatically implied meaning to this metaphor that is beyond the literal meaning of the sentence. The metaphor does indeed cause listeners to evoke an artful idea, whether it be imagery, tactile sense, or new perspectives which generate a novel conceptual relation between the domain of what coffee is like and the domain of what 8:00 AM exams are like. However, this does not entail a speaker meaning like the previous example. In this way, this sort of metaphor, a poetic metaphor, falls into the condition of having only linguistic meaning, as it does not say anything *precise* beyond the literal. There is no apparent specific proposition that can be extrapolated from the words despite the speaker having an intention to relate the two domains.

Davidson is right to say this metaphor above does not pragmatically imply something beyond the literal meaning, as this would incorrectly limit the metaphor to speaker intentions, and further, it is not always known what exactly the speaker intentions are with this sort of artful language. However, it is important to state that this is only the case for the poetic sense of metaphor. In this way, the other defining condition of metaphor is necessarily, if a metaphor fits into the category of the poetic type, the metaphor has only the linguistic meaning, does not contain speaker meaning, and facilitates thinking about the relations between each domain of the metaphor in a recontextualized light.

A potential question arises: why is the metaphor (i) not a poetic metaphor since it is now clear that “higher” relates the domain of what physical space is like to the domain of what the values of numbers are like? The metaphor (i) is not a poetic metaphor because the speaker does not generally intend for the interlocutor to think about the similarities between the domains. Rather the speaker intends for the interlocutor to understand something more related to the abstract concept of numbers in themselves.

To make this more clear, consider another example. Say Carrley is driving home and texts you the metaphor, (ii) “I *hit* traffic on the way home, running late.” Carrley’s initial intent is not for you to question the similarities between the domain of what hitting is and the domain of what traffic is like. She does not initially intend for you to think, “Huh, experiencing a traffic jam is in some way similar to hitting. Perhaps it’s aggressive, abrupt, violent, and unpleasant.” This literal meaning is merely carried within the metaphor. Rather, Carrley initially, more importantly, and maybe even only consciously, intends for you to understand that she is experiencing being in traffic. Further, when you receive the text, your first thought is something like, “Oh no, Carrley is in traffic.” You do not initially attempt to understand the fruitfulness of the metaphor, or the literal linguistic meaning of “hit.” What you do, or perhaps should understand upon initial conceptualization of the metaphor is a speaker intended meaning. Therefore, when a speaker utters this type of metaphor, pragmatic, there is both the literal meaning as well as a pragmatic speaker intended meaning.

Final Thoughts

We have now established a revised meaning of metaphor with necessary conditions depending on which of two categories the metaphor falls into. I will call this an intermittent-cognitivist view. If the metaphor is of the pragmatic sort, then necessarily the metaphor has a linguistic meaning and a pragmatic implicature which derives speaker meaning, as a result from the speaker’s intention to precisely convey an understanding of a perceptual experience, an abstract concept, or a complex idea. If the metaphor is of the poetic sort, then necessarily the metaphor has only the linguistic literal meaning, the meaning of metaphor as laid out by Davidson.

These defining conditions rely on metaphors being classified into the two categories as discussed. With the infinite number of possible metaphors, it would come to no surprise if counterexamples arise which

cannot be sorted into the binary of pragmatic and poetic, and thus cause problems for this set of conditions. Further, there could possibly be semi in-between cases of metaphors that *prima facie* pragmatically imply something beyond the literal, while at further glance also evoke imagery without conveying a clear speaker intention. It may be unknown whether or not these metaphors would produce the intended cognitive content in the listener. This may be the case with many metaphors; however, I suggest for the sake of this argument that there will always be an immediate intuition of the appropriate category for the metaphor based on initial thoughts of what the speaker is attempting to convey. A developing set of criteria that accounts for updated categorizations of metaphors is surely needed to fully answer the questions of what metaphors mean and how they carry meaning.

A qualm with the intermittent-cognitivist view of metaphor concerns a similarity to the already established view of dead and live metaphors. The dead/live metaphor dichotomy suggests that the reason pragmatic metaphors such as “the number 3 is higher than 2” do not evoke poetic imagery between the domains of spatial highness and numbers, is because pragmatic metaphors are, in a sense, “dead.” “Dead” meaning overused to the extent in which the novelty is lost, such that the only meaning is what the speaker intends to convey, that being the literal sense. A “live” metaphor corresponds to the poetic metaphor as it still induces a novel contemplation of the likeness of the referenced domains.

The wholehearted non-cognitivist, such as Davidson, may use this argument to avoid accepting the idea that a pragmatic metaphor is truth apt, as a dead metaphor’s meaning becomes the literal linguistic sense. However, it is not clear what exactly the criterion is which specifically demarcates between live and dead, thus it is not clear when or why the meaning of a pragmatic metaphor is reduced to the mere linguistic literal meaning. Further, the use of pragmatic metaphors is to communicate concepts which rely on metaphors to be expressed, as suggested by Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory. Therefore, there exists a definite thought intended to be expressed by the speaker that isn’t the literal meaning. It’s not the case that there’s a time when the pragmatic metaphor’s meaning is only the literal. Davidson does not express why this sort of metaphor would lose the original literal meaning and gain a new literal meaning that being the conceptual concept the speaker intends to convey, rather than the metaphor holding both the original linguistic meaning in addition to the pragmatically implied meaning.

With this in mind, there is value in distinguishing between metaphors that have meaning beyond the literal and those that do not. The debate of the meaning of metaphor is rooted within the cognitivist/non-cognitivist

dispute. The result shown that some metaphors do in fact have truth value while others do not shed light on the nature of which instances in language bear a truth functional quality. It is epistemically valuable to understand which uses of language have logical truth and which do not.

Works Cited

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