

Metaphor: Non-propositional effects and the communication of ‘what it’s like’

Accounts of the comprehension of metaphorical language in linguistic pragmatics tend to focus on propositional contents; this is especially apparent in the discussions of Grice (1967) and Searle (1979) who develop accounts where ‘what is said’ is patently false/uninformative, hence not communicated/meant, but is a vehicle for the communication of implicatures (implicitly communicated propositions) which constitute the speaker’s meaning and which hearers infer in order to preserve the presumption that the speaker is observing the cooperative principle. There is no mention here of any non-propositional effects, i.e. imagery, attitude, affect, even though, intuitively at least, the examples they use (‘You are the cream in my coffee’, ‘Sally is a block of ice’, ‘Juliet is the sun’) do seem to have such effects. Even the more cognitive-scientific approach of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 2008) has tended to focus on propositions, suggesting that: ‘What look like non-propositional effects associated with the expression of attitudes, feelings and states of mind can be approached in terms of weak implicature’ (1995: 222).

At the other extreme, some philosophers of language have maintained that there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning, that the only propositional content metaphors have is their literal meaning, and that what a metaphor does is make us ‘see’ the topic in a new way, prompting open-ended responses in us of an imagistic sort (Davidson 1978). Metaphorically used language triggers an imaginative engagement which lies outside the purview of a systematic pragmatic theory (Lepore & Stone 2015); the kind of imaginative activity at work here has an essentially private significance, and even if interlocutors sometimes end up sharing insights by such means, these insights are not components of the shared meaning-making endeavour. The faculty at work here is taken to be quite distinct from our standard semantic/pragmatic (proposition-generating) capacities.

I have tried to develop an account which is both more inclusive and more balanced than either of these two extremes (Carston 2010, 2018, forthcoming), making space for both the propositional and the non-propositional, which are differently weighted in different sorts of cases (more weight on the propositional in relatively conventional cases and those used for pedagogical purposes, and more weight on the imagistic/affective in creative, extended or poetic cases). Metaphorical language use is, after all, a very heterogeneous phenomenon, varying along several dimensions (familiarity/novelty; lexical/extended; spontaneous/crafted). Neuroscientific evidence shows that degree of activation of various sensory-motor brain areas depends on degree of familiarity of a metaphor; the less familiar the metaphor, the higher the activation (Desai et al. 2011; Ospina et al. 2024). Although multimodal simulations are usually thought of as unconscious (sub-personal) processes, in cases of novel metaphor requiring more time and effort for comprehension, these simulations may become consciously available

and entertained (scrutinised, manipulated and enjoyed) as what literary theorists think of as ‘mental imagery’.

The questions now are why we use language metaphorically, what is gained by prompting conscious simulation/imagery in our interlocutors, whether this is just a byproduct of the kind of mental processing required for propositional understanding, or it can have some sort of epistemic value in itself. Scientific/pedagogical metaphors (e.g. Infectious diseases described as warfare between an invading army and the defences of the organism) do seem to have an epistemic role: “We exploit our knowledge about warfare (the source domain) in order to conceptualize and thereby to come to better understand the notion of an infectious disease (the target domain).” (Kompa 2021: 38). What about more personal non-scientific metaphors, where we attempt to communicate subjective experiences (sensory-perceptual, emotional/affective, attitudinal)? In a recent paper, Kind (2024) discusses the difficulties we have describing our own phenomenal states; as she puts it ‘we lack an adequate *subjective* vocabulary for describing phenomenology’ (p.119). She suggests that one of the ways by which we may make some progress in overcoming this ‘impoverishment problem’ is through the metaphorical use of language. Examining a corpus of utterances by patients attempting to describe various states of pain or illness that they are experiencing, she shows how they almost inevitably turn to metaphorical language (e.g. rheumatic pain is described as ‘a sort of bubbling’).

I develop this idea here, arguing that one of the central uses of metaphor is precisely to overcome the limitations inherent to language in the literal expression of phenomenal states, something that gets its most heightened and evocative use in more crafted (often literary/poetic) metaphors. Consider, for instance, the following lines (from the poem ‘Hana’ by Oskar Davico), where the poet gives expression via metaphor to the powerful phenomenal state, the rush of extreme (even contradictory) feelings, of being in love (all the more evocative in the context of the complete poem, which is metaphorical from beginning to end):

Love is so lonely and so full of people.

Love is the lighthouse and the rescued mariners.

Rather than accessing files of propositional information stored under specific concepts (here, lonely, full of people, lighthouse, rescued mariners), it seems more plausible that, as Pilkington (2022), a strong advocate of a non-propositional account of poetic metaphor, puts it: ‘... we are encouraged down the route of accessing *phenomenal memories*, which, according to Damasio (1989), are also attached to concepts, to construct a phenomenal state that is *affective* as well as *perceptual*.’ The hearer/reader with the appropriate understanding of the phenomenon ***literally described*** by the metaphorical vehicle language can draw on that experience (whether sensory-

perceptual and/or emotional/affective) and apply it to the metaphor topic (here 'love') so as to reach an understanding of the experience that the speaker/writer is trying to express/communicate (Camp's (2006) view of metaphor as demonstrative-like is similar). In this respect, then, such (non-scientific) metaphors can be said to have a certain kind of epistemic value: they enhance one's grasp of someone else's phenomenal state, perhaps enabling better understanding of one's own comparable phenomenal state and so achieving a sense of the sharedness of an experience, which had previously felt to be wholly subjective, ineffable, and 'locked within'.

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