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Michael Devitt and Richard Hanley

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Chapter 9

Figurative Language

Josef Stern

For much of the last century the philosophy of language would have been more accurately called 'the philosophy of literal language.' The study of figurative language – the range of tropes including metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, simile, irony, over- and under-statement, etc. – was largely confined to the peripheries of aesthetics and rhetoric.[1] Logical positivists denied figures of speech "cognitive" or "empirical" content, consigning them to the grunts and wows of emotive or affective significance. Semantics and formally oriented theories of meaning, whose native language was that of science, mathematics, and logic, took as its model the eternal, the non-vague, the assertive, and the extensional. The figurative was either neglected, dismissed, or deposited in the wastebasket of pragmatics.

Matters began to change in the mid-1950s, and from the start contemporary investigation of the figurative has largely centered on metaphor. Max Black's essay "Metaphor" (Black 1962) first put the figure on the agenda of Anglo American philosophy by presenting it, in the Oxford vocabulary of his day, as a subject of "logical grammar" and by arguing, against the prevailing current, that metaphors are cognitively significant in ways that distinguish them from the literal. A second landmark was the central place Nelson Goodman assigned to metaphor in his *Languages of art* (Goodman 1976) as part of his program to show that there are common modes of symbolization that cut across natural languages and non-linguistic representational systems. But the greatest changes have occurred since the 1980s as increasing attention has been paid to what were previously considered imperfections of natural language – especially context dependent expressions like indexicals, vagueness, and non extensional constructions. Philosophers have come to acknowledge the ubiquity of metaphor, in scientific discourse as well as ordinary language, making it impossible to dismiss as poetry or literature. An additional impetus has been the emergence of the cognitive sciences, for which metaphor has furnished one of the most fertile grounds for interdisciplinary research. Some of these investigators find in metaphor the key to deep truths about the human

conceptual system (Johnson 1981; Lakoff 1993); for others (e.g., Stern 2000), its interest is more like that of exotic phenomena in physics: its indirect, often remote, but potentially significant implications for the general explanatory principles that are the primary interest of the field – for our notions of meaning, truth, appropriateness. In short, metaphor is now a live topic in the field.

In this chapter I shall concentrate on implications of figurative language and specifically metaphor for the philosophy of language. In particular I shall focus on the relation between the metaphorical and the literal. By singling out the particular trope of metaphor, I do not mean to suggest that all the figures constitute one natural semantic kind of which metaphor is the paradigm. Toward the end of the chapter I'll mention some considerations against this presumption, but we shall also question the degree to which all metaphors constitute a single cohesive trope.

1

Since metaphor is both contrasted with and said to depend on the literal, the appropriate place to begin-ought to be with a precise, explicit definition of the literal. Unfortunately, we do not yet possess any such thing. As an opening working hypothesis, I shall assume that the literal meaning of a simple expression is whatever, according to our best linguistic theory, turns out to be its semantic interpretation and that the literal meaning of a sentence is the rule-by-rule composition of the literal meanings of its simple constituents.[2] Now, given this rough characterization of the literal, one of the oldest and most deeply entrenched conceptions of metaphor characterizes it as improper or deviant use of the literal. (For a careful history of this idea, see White 2001). With the linguistic turn in the twentieth century, philosophers and linguists resurrected this view, cashing out the relevant impropriety in (sometimes formal) terms of semantic anomaly, grammatical or sortal violations, conceptual absurdity, or category mistakes (Beardsley 1962, 1978; Matthews 1971, Levin 1977; Kittay 1987). One attractive feature of this proposal was its simple explanation of how we identify or recognize an utterance as a metaphor. On the presumption that utterances should always be taken literally unless proven "impossible" to be so understood, the deviance thesis provides semantic or syntactic conditions within the very sentence by which one can explain why, when violated, the utterance is literally uninterpretable; and from this it is immediately concluded (invalidly, however, since there are always alternative kinds of nonliteral interpretation) that it is identified as a metaphor. The same deviance is used to explain how the metaphorical interpretation is fixed. The literal semantic deviance of the utterance forces the interpreter to delete or re-weigh those lexical features in the literal meaning of the expression in virtue of which it is deviant. This in turn results in a new metaphorical meaning constructed from the residual components of the literal meaning – which also neatly explains how the metaphorical depends on the literal: the former is contained in the latter (Cohen and Margalit 1972).

The doctrine that all or typical metaphors, if they were interpreted literally, are grammatically deviant or semantically anomalous or "wildly false" (Cavell 1967), was one of the most widely held dogmas about metaphor in its day. In the mid-seventies, however, this dogma was decisively challenged. Various philosophers and linguists observed that there exist 'twice true metaphors' that would be perfectly fine and equally true in the very same contexts, whether they are interpreted literally or metaphorically (Reddy 1969; T. Cohen 1975, 1976; Binkley 1976). For example:

(1) A revolution is not a matter of inviting people to dinner (Mao Tse tung)
(2) Japan, the land of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, feels it has no alternative. (*Time* Magazine caption on a post-Chernobyl photo of Japanese nuclear power plants)
(3) Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (Robert Frost)
(4) Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest. (Emmanuel Levinas)

These examples demonstrated, simply on descriptive grounds, that literal deviance cannot be a necessary condition for metaphor. But there are also deeper explanatory difficulties for this view.

First, it assumes a literal-first serial model of processing on which the speaker-hearer turns to a metaphorical interpretation *only after* the literal interpretation has been eliminated. But there is good evidence that literal and nonliteral interpretations are simultaneously processed, in parallel, and that we select one over another kind of interpretation because it is the *best* rather than the *only possible* candidate interpretation (Stern 1983; Gibbs 1994; Recanati 1995). It should also be added that the factors that bear on our identification of an interpretation type are not necessarily the actual syntactic and semantic properties of the sentence, but our beliefs and presuppositions about those features as well as about the speaker's intentions, his expectations about his interpreter, and its setting – a rough set of factors that we 'compute' using Grice-like maxims to determine the *relative* plausibility and accessibility of the appropriate interpretation. In short, recognition that an utterance is of a certain interpretive kind depends on its context.

Second, the very idea that metaphorical use or meaning is literally deviant assumes that the literal is itself normative: "that there are standard meanings for words fixed by conventions normative for our use of words" (White 2001). But if it should turn out that the literal use of language is not governed by such conventions, if instead it is moved by the pressures and expectations of effective communication in context, and if the same pressures and expectations move communication by metaphor, that would leave no sharp distinction by which the latter ought to be regarded as deviant relative to the former, hence without a clear contrast between the two.

In response to these objections, diehard defenders of deviance have retreated to various brands of pragmatic inappropriateness or unacceptability, including the blatant truth of metaphors like 'Boys will be boys' that it would be pointless for anyone to assert (Beardsley 1978; Grice 1989; Kittay 1987). But this rejoinder misses the real import of the critique of the literal deviance account: there need be *nothing* irregular or unacceptable – syntactically, semantically, or pragmatically – about the literal meaning of a sentence used metaphorically. Like certain art works, metaphors are often *found* in their context rather than designed according to a manufacturer's specification (T. Cohen forthcoming). Although there is surely *some* reason why we take an utterance to be metaphorical (or of any particular kind), deviance as an explanation of the relation between the metaphorical and the literal has turned out to be a red herring.

II

A second classic claim about the metaphorical-literal relation begins from the observation that a sentence used metaphorically, e.g.,

(5) Juliet is the sun

uttered by Romeo in the context of Shakespeare's play, might (and in that context does) have a different truth value from what it would have were it interpreted literally. But different truth *values* for the same sentence used in the same context twice-over, literally and metaphorically, entail that the different uses have different truth *conditions* and, if truth conditions are either identical with or determined by their meanings, then the same sentence used literally and used metaphorically must have different meanings on the two uses. On the one hand, then, the sentence must have a metaphorical as well as a literal meaning. On the other, the metaphorical meaning of an expression is not independent of its literal meaning in the way in which the multiple meanings of ambiguous expressions like 'bank' are independent of each other or the meaning of an idiom like 'red herring' is independent of those of its constituents 'red' and 'herring.' These other meanings are independent in that I can know one without knowing the other: I can know that 'bank' means the place to deposit my paycheck without knowing that it can refer to the side of a river, and I can know that 'red herring' means a misleading clue without having any idea what that has to do with being red or being a herring.[3] But I cannot know, or understand, what is metaphorically meant or said when Romeo utters (5) without knowing the literal meaning of 'the sun' (and without holding a variety of beliefs about the literal referent of the expression). Thus the metaphorical meaning of an utterance *depends* on its literal meaning in a way that distinguishes their relation from these other meaning relations. A main desideratum for an account of metaphor is to make sense of these two semantic facts: that expressions used metaphorically can have meanings different from their literal meanings but that the metaphorical meaning none the less depends on the literal one.

Probably the most natural way to work out this metaphorical-literal dependence would be by a theory of use or pragmatics. If we distinguish between what a *sentence* 'S is P' means and what a *speaker* can *use* it to mean, say, that S is R, we might identify the literal with the former and take the metaphorical meaning to be a special case of the latter. While R is not the semantic meaning of P, there nonetheless seems to be something systematic about their relation, hence, some principle that explains how the latter is conveyed by the former. The principle might be either a conversational maxim that generates implicatures (Grice 1989), or an interpretive rule that depends on mutual recognition of intentions (Fogelin 1988), or a special illocution or perlocution of the speech act (T. Cohen 1975), or a principle in virtue of which R is "called to mind" given an utterance of P (Searle 1993).[4] As Searle puts it, R is the metaphorical meaning of the predicate P on a particular occasion, and the fact that P conveys R according to one or the other of these principles is the sense in which the metaphorical (speaker's meaning) depends on the literal (sentence meaning).

Searle's account is an especially good example of the strengths and weaknesses of pragmatic theories of metaphor. What it correctly demonstrates is that there is no single "ground" (e.g., resemblance, salience), as it was traditionally called, that generates all metaphorical contents. For Searle, the Rs may be features definitionally or accidentally true of Ps, or only culturally or naturally "associated with P in our minds" even if they are not true or even *believed* to be true of Ps. The Rs (such as being the center of the speaker's world, in (5)) that serve as metaphorical interpretations of expressions P ('is the sun') are as heterogeneous as can be. Therefore, in order to *describe* the range of Rs, Searle's principles provide us with a helpful catalogue of *what* can serve as a metaphorical interpretation. However, the same descriptive ecumenicalism of his principles is the cause of their explanatory failure. Because a feature that one principle rules out can be ruled back in by another principle, the principles place no constraints on the class of possible features that can enter into a given metaphorical interpretation. Furthermore, what it is for *X to call Y to mind* is no better understood than the phenomenon of metaphor it is meant to explain, and even were we able to furnish an explanation of this psychological phenomenon, not everything that something calls to mind, or reminds us of, is something it *means*. Hence, such an account is hardly sufficient to explain why something is or is not a metaphorical *meaning*.

Similar difficulties arise for those who take metaphor to be, in Goodman's (1979) memorable phrase, any "moonlighting" use of language: any secondary, temporary, nonstandard use of language that is spontaneously, without special instruction or learning, derived from our mastery of a primary use. Such a view casts the net too widely; what we need is either a distinctive mechanism for metaphor (e.g., Aristotle's notion of transfer, whatever its effect) or a set of distinctive effects (e.g., bringing us to notice similarities, by whatever means) (Hills 1997).

In light of the failure of pragmatic *theories* of metaphorical meaning, it is tempting to draw a more radical moral that takes metaphor to be a matter of use as *opposed* to meaning. This is the sense in which Richard Rorty claims that "metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use": it follows no regula predictable, law-like linguistic behavior like that whose "limits mark off (tempo arily) the literal use of language," where "semantical notions like 'meaning' have role" and outside of which, in the "jungle of use" (Rorty 1987: 285), there is n place for meaning, let alone metaphorical meaning. Although his own view is n as extreme as Rorty's, the most influential exponent of this general position Donald Davidson (1984; cf. his 1986), who claims (1) that neither the individu words nor the sentence in a metaphorical utterance have a metaphorical meanin in addition to or in place of their literal meaning; (2) that what a metaph 'conveys' is instead just an unpredictable causal effect of its utterance event, t product of a non-rule-governed imaginative use of the sentence exclusively with ordinary literal meaning, whose intended effect is to make us notice a likeness; a (3) that what the metaphor conveys is non-propositional: there is no "defin cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter m grasp if he is to get the message" (Davidson 1984: 262).

Davidson's provocative claim that "a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond literal)" (1984: 247) has confounded many of his readers. After all, we ordina make and deny assertions with metaphors, give reasons using them, and ci understand or fail to understand the contents of metaphors whose truth conditi are different from their literal interpretations. But on Davidson's view, there is metaphorical content to be asserted, nothing to understand or fail to underst about a metaphor. The objection, it should be added, does not hang specifically the notion of metaphorical meaning or taking meaning to be content or t conditions. We ordinarily take some metaphors to be correct, or apt, others Whether or not one endorses metaphorical meaning, some explanation is neces of what about an utterance leads us to judge one correct or apt, another Davidson's own positive story that what the metaphor conveys is simply a ca effect of the utterance is also insufficient to explain these linguistic phenomena compares metaphors to jokes, dreams, bumps on the head. Just as jokes make/c us (to) laugh, so metaphors make/cause us (to) see likenesses. And just as no would posit a "joker meaning" to explain why jokes make us laugh, so, he ar the explanatory force of metaphorical meanings are no better than dorm powers. Instead, what causes the metaphorically distinctive effect of making u a likeness "depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those *words* and *hen* the ordinary meanings of the *sentences* they comprise" (p. 247, my emph Davidson nowhere explains the causal *explanation* he has in mind that appea semantic facts like meanings, but his shift from the ordinary, or literal, meanin *words* to that of the *sentence* raises problems for his claim of causal depen (White 1996, 2001; Levinson 2001; Stern 2000). If the metaphorical effect ca depends just on the component individual words, say, 'Juliet' and 'the sun' and on their co-occurrence in the linear concrete string, then syntax (which may differ not at the surface but at a deeper abstract structural level) should be irrelevant – and indeed Davidson compares the way a metaphor works to the brute juxtaposition of the alternating stanzas in T. S. Eliot's "The Hippopotamus" that refer respectively to hippopotamuses and the church. But even simple metaphors that differ only in their superficial subject-predicate structure have systematically and predictably different metaphorical effects, e.g., 'A man is a tree' and 'A tree is a man.' This suggests that not only the literal meanings of the constituent *words* but also some aspect of the literal meaning at the unit of the *sentence*, determined by or corresponding to its syntax, must be taken into account (Stern 2000) On the other hand, if we take the metaphorical effect to depend on the literal meaning of the sentence uttered, it is not clear that the sentence used metaphorically has or retains its literal meaning, i.e., that its literal meaning is what its speaker understands by the utterance on the occasion. For if we identify the literal meaning of a sentence with its truth conditions, as does Davidson, it is doubtful that we *understand* what must be the case for, say, (5) taken literally to be true, namely, the conditions in which Juliet, a human being, is the sun, a star. We know that and why the literal sentence is *false*, but knowledge of truth conditions requires that we also know what the world would have to be like for the sentence to *obtain* – which, in this case, we do not. And if the *sentence* used metaphorically does not *have* its literal meaning, if it cannot be so understood, its metaphorical effect clearly cannot depend on it or be explained by its means (White 1996; Margalit and Goldblum 1994; for additional arguments against Davidson's non-cognitivist, causal theory, see White 1996, Moran 1989, 1996; Stern 2000; Riemer 2001.)

III

Since Davidson's causal account seems no more promising than pragmatic theories like Searle's, let's turn back to the idea that it is metaphorical *meaning* that depends on the literal. Recall that according to accounts like Searle's, the metaphorical meaning of P in a metaphorical use of 'S is P' is the feature R, the feature based on resemblance or another ground, metaphorically expressed by P on the particular occasion; R (e.g., being the center of Romeo's world) is the meaning of P (e.g., 'is the sun,' used metaphorically in (5) in the context of Shakespeare's play) because it would be the constituent corresponding to P in the truth-conditions for the utterance.[5] Against this position, Davidson argues, rightly, that (1) R is not a feature of P that it "has prior to and independent of the context of use" and (2) unlike literal meaning that has explanatory power insofar as it enables us to explain why all utterances of the sentence of which it is the meaning have the same truth conditions, there are no analogous cross-contextual regularities to explain for metaphor: each metaphorical utterance in its context appears to express a different truth-conditional feature in that context.

The not insignificant grain of truth in Davidson's critique is that accounts like Searle's that employ metaphorical meanings play fast and loose with the notion of meaning. However, his criticism suggests a rejoinder that points us in the right direction to discover what metaphorical meaning really is: If we could find regularities in the behavior of metaphors that call for an explanation *and* if we could propose a candidate other than specific features like R that explain those regularities, we would be on our way toward a defensible notion of metaphorical meaning. In order to meet Davidson's two conditions, let's focus on his observation that metaphorical interpretation is context-dependent. That is to say two things. First, metaphorical interpretations of utterances of the same expression (type) may vary widely from one occasion, or context, to another. Second, the interpretation of a metaphor is typically a function of all sorts of extralinguistic presuppositions, skills, and abilities such as the perception of similarity or salience. Now, these two ways in which a metaphor is context dependent entail that a metaphorical interpretation cannot be known by a speaker *solely* or *exclusively* in virtue of his semantic competence; hence, if metaphorical meaning must be an object of semantic competence, specific features like R cannot be metaphorical meanings. However, this does not show that metaphor lies outside semantics entirely, or that nothing could be metaphorical meaning. Its context variation also does not show that metaphor is unpredictable and idiosyncratic; on the contrary, *if* we survey how metaphorical interpretations vary from context to context, we see that they are relatively systematic and regular. To illustrate this point, contrast the different interpretations of 'is the sun' in (5), first, uttered in the context depicted in Shakespeare's play

(6) But soft, what *light* through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Juliet *is the sun.*
Arise fair *sun* and kill the envious *moon*,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she . . .
Two of the fairest *stars* in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her *eyes*.
To *twinkle* in their spheres till they return.
What if her *eyes* were there, they in her head?
The *brightness* of her cheek would shame those *stars*,
As *daylight* doth a *lamp*; her *eyes in heaven*
Would through the airy region stream so *bright*,
That birds would sing, and think it were not *night*.

(*Romeo and Juliet* II, ii, 2–23, my italics)

where it means, say, that Juliet is unequaled by her peers, worshipped by her lover, and the center of his life – with its interpretation in a context in which Juliet is presupposed to be the kind of woman who consumes anyone who gets too closely involved with her, whom she simply burns up; or in yet a third context where she is presupposed to be someone utterly (and boringly) reliable, predictable, and regular in her movements, someone you can always count on to rise and set, who never surprises or even inspires. Or consider the interpretation of the 'sun' metaphor in Salisbury's description of the end of Richard II's reign to the Welsh Captain:

(7) Ah, Richard, with the eyes of heavy mind
I see thy glory like *a shooting star*
Fall to the base *earth* from the *firmament*.
Thy sun sets weeping in the lowly *west*,
Witness *storms* to come, woe and unrest;
Thy friends are fled to wait upon thy foes,
And crossly to thy good all fortune goes. (*Richard II*, II, iv; my emphasis)

where the (setting) sun exemplifies and thereby expresses (declining) glory, (lost) authority, and insecurity. Or the interpretation of 'is the sun' in

(8) Achilles is the sun.

in a context where it expresses Achilles' devastating anger or brute force, or in the Spanish Hebrew poet Judah Halevi's love poem:

(9) The *night* the girl gazelle displayed to me
Her cheek – the sun – beneath its *veil* of hair,
Red as a ruby, and beneath, a *brow*
Of moistened *marble* (color wondrous fair!)
I fancied her *the sun*, which *rising reddens*
Clouds of morning with its *crimson* flare. (Scheindlin 1986: 119)

where it expresses the beloved girl's radiant but (together with the 'marble' metaphor) cold personality and character.

Looking one by one at the contents of the metaphorical interpretations of '(is) the sun' in each of these examples, there is little they share. But if we look at the triples of contents, common expression type, and their respective contexts, the different contents correspond to some difference related to their respective contexts, whether the latter differences are verbally articulated in their (literary) context or, as we see from the different contexts of (5), constituted by unarticulated beliefs or presuppositions. The moral is that there may be little that is systematic or predictable so long as we look only at the particular contents of different metaphorical interpretations in each context one by one, but at one 'level' of interpretation more abstract – at a level that relates each content of the same expression used metaphorically to a relevant feature of its respective context of use, namely, the shared presuppositions – metaphorical interpretation does follow regularities and supports predictions. Same expression, same context – i.e., same presuppositions – same interpretation; same expression, different contexts – i.e.,

different presuppositions – different interpretations. The structure of these variations – which I would conjecture is the "transfer" of which Aristotle (1984) spoke – is essential to understand both the productivity of metaphor and speakers' mastery of the mechanism of metaphorical interpretation.

In order to explain these variations, I have argued elsewhere (Stern 2000) that we should take the context-dependence of metaphor literally: by treating metaphors on the model of paradigmatic context-dependent expressions – demonstratives and indexicals (e.g., 'this,' 'thus,' 'I,' 'now'). The *contents* (truth-conditional factors) and referents of these words also vary across contexts, but the variation is systematic – and it is the meaning or, in David Kaplan's semantic terminology for demonstratives (1989a, 1989b), the *character* of the word, e.g., for 'I,' the rule that each of its utterances refers to its speaker, that spells out the systematic dependence of the interpretation, or content (its direct referent), of the indexical on the relevant parameter of its context. Likewise, we can identify a rule, or function, for a metaphor that spells out the way its interpretation – a set of features like R that belong to its truth conditions or content – on an occasion depends on and varies with a specific parameter of its context, namely, a particular set of presuppositions. That rule for the interpretation of a metaphor – like the rule for the first-person 'I' – is its *meaning* (character), *not* the set of features R which are instead its content. Together with its context, the meaning (character) of the metaphor – what the speaker knows in virtue of her linguistic competence when she is able to produce and comprehend a metaphor – fixes the content of its interpretation, the features R, although it is not itself part of that content. (For other accounts of the context-dependence of metaphor, see Berg 1988; Bergmann 1982; Bezuidenhout 2001; Kittay 1987; Nogales 1999; Scheffler 1979.)

Despite this analogy, there are, to be sure, significant differences between the context-dependence of metaphors and demonstratives/indexicals. In the case of singular demonstratives/indexicals, the contextual parameters are familiar and relatively well-defined: the speaker for 'I,' the time of utterance for 'now,' the demonstratum for 'that,' and so on. The contextual parameter for metaphors, whose basic syntactic unit is the predicate, is rather less defined: a set of presuppositions.[6] Presupposition here is the pragmatic notion, a species of propositional attitude (Stalnaker 1972, 1973), a set of propositions to which a speaker, in making an utterance, commits himself, in the absence of which his assertion would be inappropriate or (as with metaphor) his utterance uninterpretable as it is. These presuppositions constitute the context of a metaphor insofar as they define its range of possible interpretations on the occasion. They can also be characterized as "common knowledge" about features or properties associated with the metaphorical expression so long as we bear in mind that they need not be true or even be believed to be true. For as Black (1962) first observed, what is relevant to the metaphorical interpretation of an expression Ø are its "system of associated commonplaces," rather than its definition or the features actually true of Ø's; as we saw earlier, the contents of these presuppositions – which do the work performed by the traditional "grounds" – are as varied as can be. Indeed all the presupposed features have in common is that they are presupposed in the context to be "associated" with the expression being interpreted metaphorically. Furthermore, the full set of relevant presuppositions include not only those associated with the metaphorical expression (e.g., 'is the sun' in (5)) but also those associated with other elements in its linguistic and extra-linguistic environment (e.g., 'Juliet'). The main difference between these different sets of presuppositions is that the former serve to generate potential features of content, while the latter filter out those that cannot be appropriately taken to be the content of the metaphor in the context (Reinhart 1970; Stern 2000).[7]

What makes something a metaphor according to this account is both narrower and wider than the received view. There is no one kind of associated property (e.g., such as a feature of resemblance) that serves as the ground for all metaphors; rather, interpretations that draw on all sorts of properties count as metaphors. But what is essential is that the feature be presupposed to be associated with the metaphorical vehicle in the context, such that were a different feature presupposed in the context, then the interpretation of the metaphor would correspondingly differ. What distinguishes a metaphor is not the kind of feature that enters into its interpretation, but its context-sensitive meaning (character) that yields different features in different contexts.

The complex poetic metaphors (6), (7), and (9) illustrate another important characteristic of the metaphorically relevant presuppositions. Each of the individual metaphors in these passages is interpreted relative to a schema, network, or family of expressions, sometimes explicitly spelled out in the context (as in the poems), but often merely suggested in the context. This systemic dimension of metaphorical interpretation was first pointed out by Nelson Goodman (1976) but in recent years it has become a leitmotif in the literature, due in large measure to the research on 'conventional metaphors' of the linguist George Lakoff and his school (Lakoff 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994; for alternative systemic accounts, see Kittay 1987; Thompson and Thompson 1987; Tirrell 1989; White 1996).[8] In the complex metaphors of (6), (7), and (9), the interpretations of 'the sun' vary according to the schema of objects (marked by the italicized expressions) with which the (literal) referent or extension of the metaphorical vehicle is classified in the context. For the features associated with any one expression that are exemplified, sampled, or drawn to salient attention by its extension depend both on the other members in the schema and on the range of features sampled by the schema as a whole. Thus the underlying unit for the interpretation of an individual metaphor is its whole schema, network, or family, whether or not the latter are made explicit in the context. Moreover, such an exemplification schema is not the only kind of system or network that contributes to the metaphorical interpretation. The set of expressions (or kinds of expressions) that fill the thematic roles for predicate metaphors are implicated in its interpretation, as are the many ways in which we extend metaphors by drawing out their various, more or less strong inductive consequences. For example, in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the yellow fog is a cat that rubs its back on the window, licks its tongue, makes sudden leaps, curls about the house, and sleeps. Closer attention to these roles of systematic networks in metaphorical interpretation, and their interaction, promises to explain how complex metaphors in poetry function. (The best philosophical analysis of complex metaphors in poetry and literature is now White 1996.)

IV

Let's suppose now that a speaker's semantic competence in metaphor, like the semantic competence that underlies her ability to use demonstratives, consists in knowledge of its meaning, or character, namely, a function from the metaphorically relevant associated properties in the context set of presuppositions to the particular subset of properties that constitute the content of the metaphor in that context. Still, there remains a disanalogy between demonstratives and metaphors. Meanings (or characters) are of expressions but metaphor is a kind of use or interpretation; what expression, then, is a metaphorical meaning a meaning of? In order to lexically realize metaphorical interpretation, I coin an expression 'Mthat' which is modeled after David Kaplan's 'Dthat,' an operator which, prefixed to a definite description Φ, lexically represents the demonstrative interpretation or use of Φ. Just as 'Dthat' takes the description 'the man in black' and produces the demonstrative 'Dthat['the man in black']' that directly (and rigidly) refers to the individual in the context who fits the description, so 'Mthat' takes a literal expression like 'is the sun' and produces the "metaphorical expression" 'Mthat['is the sun']' that expresses a particular subset of presupposed properties associated with the embedded expression in the context. Of course, 'Mthat' no more than 'Dthat' is an actual expression of English; but it is intended to capture the linguistic competence that underlies our ability to use or interpret expressions metaphorically. With these "metaphorical expressions" in hand, we are also now in a position to explicate how the metaphorical depends on the literal. Although neither the meaning/character nor the content/truth condition of the metaphorical expression is a compositional function of the meaning or content of its constituents, we can *individuate* the metaphorical expression 'Mthat[Φ]' by the linguistic type of Φ: If Φ and φ are of different types, then Mthat[Φ] and Mthat[φ] are of different types.

The notion of meaning at work in metaphor is not, then, the content or truth conditional factor corresponding to the utterance in a context. Rather, the meaning of a metaphor is what fixes its content or truth conditions without itself being part of it. This notion of metaphorical meaning also serves a second function that linguistic meaning in general serves: to capture linguistic *constraints* that determine which of a speaker's intentions can be (literally) communicated by which expressions. Similarly, metaphorical meaning constrains the content a speaker can use an expression to express metaphorically. Let me give one example, beginning with a similar constraint that governs the interpretation of indexicals. Suppose I utter

(10) I live in Jerusalem.

In order for Susan to report what I have said, she must say

(11) Stern says that he lives in Jerusalem,

not

(12) Stern says that I live in Jerusalem

because the referent and content of the indexical 'I' is *always* fixed by its actual context of utterance, the context of its actual speaker, not that of, say, the belief-worlds of the subject of the sentence expressed in (12). Therefore Susan *must* shift from 'I' to 'he' (or to another word that captures the original content of the indexical, if she wants to express that content in words). I shall call this way in which the interpretation of the indexical always cleaves to its actual context of utterance the Actual Context Constraint (ACC). Similarly, suppose I say:

(13) He [points at a person who in c is Al] might have been president (uttered in a context c, which includes a world w).

Because (13) contains the modal 'might,' uttered in the context c (including the world w), it is true just in case

(14) There is some possible world w* (accessible to w) in which Al *is* president.

It is not enough for (13) to be true at w* that there be someone in w*, say, George, who is pointed at in w* and who is president. Although the truth value of the sentence (13) is determined by the *facts* at the counterfactual world w*; according to the ACC, its *interpretation* or *content* is always fixed by its actual context of utterance c.

A similar story holds for metaphor. Suppose Count Paris in Shakespeare's play denies (5) but concedes:

(15) Well, Juliet might have been the sun (uttered in c which includes w)

where 'the sun' is again interpreted metaphorically to express the proposition that Juliet is peer-less. Since (15) is a modal sentence, it is true in w, the world of its context of utterance, just in case

(16) There is some possible world w* (accessible to w) in which Juliet *is* the sun.

where 'is the sun' is interpreted metaphorically. Here, again, the relevant interpretation of 'is the sun' is its interpretation in its context c – that she is peer-less – not

the interpretation it would be given in w* had it been uttered there. Suppose, for example, that in w* 'the sun' is the paradigm example of boring regularity; it is not sufficient for (or relevant to) the truth of Paris's utterance of (15) in c, interpreted metaphorically, that Juliet in w* be tediously predictable in her actions. She must possess in w* the property expressed by the metaphor in c. That is, like demonstratives, metaphorical interpretation obeys the ACC. As with 'I,' it does not determine what the metaphor *must* say, or under what conditions it is true; it only specifies what the interpretation *cannot* be, and this constraint calls for a kind of meaning, common to indexicals and metaphors.[9]

Apart from expressing constraints on metaphorical interpretation, the idea of metaphorical meaning can also answer classical questions about the semantic status of metaphorical interpretations. Traditionally, it has been assumed that either (1) the metaphorical mode of expression of an utterance is merely stylistic, carrying no additional cognitive content beyond that of its literally meant words; or (2) the metaphor expresses content specific to its metaphorical interpretation but of the same type as the kind of content expressed by literal language; or (3) the content of the metaphor is entirely sui generis, completely unlike the information conveyed by the literal. And to solve this problem, philosophers have traditionally turned to a literal paraphrasability test (Black 1962; Cavell 1967). But until recently progress has been hampered by the inherently unclear criteria for success in this test. (See, however, Davidson 1984; Bergmann 1982; Levinson 2001). In recent years philosophers have turned the inquiry in new, more promising directions: looking at the cognitive functioning of metaphors in scientific theories, religious language, and art criticism (Boyd 1993; Alston 1964; Denham 1998), at ways in which a metaphor can make us *see* something *as* something else that cannot be captured by a simple belief attitude (Black 1979; Davies 1982; Davidson 1986; Moran 1989), and at the role of metaphors in creating a sense of intimacy or community and their relation to jokes and riddles, an approach that promises to illuminate other cognitive aspects of metaphor such as their sense of surprise (T. Cohen 1978; Stern 2000).

To illustrate how a metaphorical mode of expression may carry a kind of information in addition to its truth-conditional content expressed in its context, here is one example involving the explanatory power of metaphor in belief ascriptions. Marie, a young woman in her teens, suffered from the eating disorder of *anorexia nervosa*. In treatment, she explained to her therapist that her mother had forbade her to continue seeing her boyfriend. Angrily, she reported, she had said to herself:

(17) I won't swallow that [referring to her mother's interdiction].

Let's assume that in the context in which she uttered (17) Marie's use of the word 'swallow' was metaphorical (Merleau-Ponty, cited in Danto 1978). Let's also suppose that *what* Marie *said* by (17) interpreted metaphorically, is expressed by

(18) Marie won't obey her mother's interdiction.

Does (18) adequately express everything said by Marie's utterance of (17)? Yes and No. Yes, insofar as (17) is true, spoken by Marie referring to her mother's interdiction, just in case Marie does not obey her mother's interdiction, i.e., (18). No, insofar as her utterance of (17) is meant to contribute to an *explanation* of her anorexic behavior, albeit as an irrational way of resisting her mother's command. For in order to explain why Marie stopped *eating* in terms of a belief we would ascribe to her on the evidence of her utterance of (17), we must somehow include as part of the representation of her belief the fact that what she said, namely, that she would not obey her mother, was expressed metaphorically using the verb 'swallow.' Only under that metaphorical mode of expression of what she said – only if we include *how* she metaphorically believed, or expressed, *what* she believed – can we see any connection, conscious or unconscious, between her belief and her subsequent anorexic behavior. To be sure, Marie's behavior and the connection she made are not rational, and no explanation should make it so. But only by acknowledging the cognitive and explanatory significance of the metaphorical meaning in which she expressed her belief can we explain her behavior at all. The metaphorical mode in which Marie expressed her belief is essential, not to determine whether what she said is true or false, but for our folk-psychological purposes of explaining her behavior.[10]

V

To conclude this chapter, I shall briefly raise three questions for future research. First, what is the relation between metaphor and other types of figurative language? Since I have now argued that there is no one ground for all metaphors, instead all that is common to different metaphors is their context-dependent meaning (character) which is sensitive to various presupposed sets of features, one would think that the same account could be extended to other figures. All that would distinguish, say, metonymy or synchedoche from metaphor would be the particular contents of their respective presuppositions; in this respect different figures would differ no differently than different metaphors – all in virtue of the different contents of the relevant presuppositions. Furthermore, other figures like irony seem to be context-dependent as much as metaphor: although the ironic interpretation of an utterance is the "opposite" of its literal interpretation, what counts as "opposite" – the contradictory or a contrary (and which one) – is fixed in context. Nonetheless there seem to be semantically significant differences between two classes of figures: metaphor, metonymy, synechdoche, simile, on the one hand, irony, over and understatement, on the other. Although knowledge of each depends on knowledge of the literal, the first class (centered around metaphor) involves an operation that takes a literal meaning (character) and yields a figurative meaning (character) which, given its contextual parameter, then determines its truth conditions or content. The second class (centered around irony) involves an operation that takes propositions (content) to yield different propositions (content) (Stern 2000).

Second, is metaphor a language-specific phenomenon? Are or could there be non-linguistic, say, pictorial metaphors? Since we have argued that grounds like resemblance are not essential to metaphor but aspects like context-dependence are, is there anything analogous to the semantic context-dependence of indexicals in non-linguistic mediums like pictures?[11] Indeed, on reflection it is not even clear what it is to be a pictorial or musical metaphor. Without question there are illustrated metaphors, i.e., illustrations in pictures of what are essentially linguistic metaphors; but could there be metaphors in the pictorial medium that are not parasitic off language? (On this question, see Goodman 1976; Carroll 1994; Stern 1997.)

Finally, what – in more precise terms than the working hypothesis we proposed at the beginning of this essay – is the literal on which the metaphor depends? Throughout this chapter, we have presupposed that there is *a* distinction between the literal and metaphorical, but that is not to say that it is always clear to which side of the divide a given interpretation of an expression belongs. If, as we have been arguing, context sensitivity to presuppositions is essential to metaphor, at least one notion of the literal may be characterized as context-*in*dependent interpretation. (See, however, Searle 1978; Recanati 1995; Stern 2000.) However, to make that case, we need finer distinctions between different kinds of context-in/dependence and we need to take into account a continuum of metaphorical interpretations that range from the very live, productive, and highly context-specific, through various kinds and degrees of dead metaphors, metaphors that are not only less context-dependent but less so in various respects. Closer attention to this remarkable range of phenomena will increase our understanding not only of metaphor but of that literal language that was long thought to be the exclusive domain of semantics and the philosophy of language.[12]

Notes

1 By 'metaphor' or 'figurative language,' I always mean the metaphorical or figurative *use* or *interpretation* of language. It is widely acknowledged nowadays that expressions (types) are not themselves either literal or figurative, only interpretations or uses of their tokens or utterances (in context).

2 As a matter of fact, current semantic theory is not yet in a position to state with any authority *what* the semantic interpretation of a simple expression is, but it should also be noted that, from what we do know, it is nothing like a set of necessary and sufficient descriptive conditions. Minimally, it contains the extension or referent of the expression and the constraints and conditions that govern both its interaction with the syntax and with its extra-linguistic context. For proposals about the literal, see Alston 1964, Searle 1978, Davidson 1986, Stern 2000. We return to the literal at the end of the chapter.

3 A red herring is a fallacy of irrelevance, so-called because of the reputed practice of escaped convicts who used pickled herrings to throw bloodhounds off the scent. It is not difficult to imagine a current speaker who knows that a red herring is an irrelevant argument even if she has never learned that a herring is a fish or (much less plausibly) that 'red' is the name of a color.

4 It should be noted that Grice himself uses his conversational maxims only to explain how we recognize an utterance as a metaphor; when he turns to interpretation, he falls back on similarity or other traditional grounds.

5 Note that the feature R metaphorically expressed by P is itself expressed metaphorically as 'being the center of Romeo's world.' This is no problem unless one takes an analysis of metaphor to require that the contents of all metaphors be expressible in literal language. It is arguable, to the contrary, that what characterizes metaphors is that they are explicated and extended using additional metaphors; on this issue, see Tirrell 1989; Stern 2000; T. Cohen forthcoming.

6 In this respect, metaphors are closer to predicate demonstratives such as 'thus' or the predicative 'is that F'; see Stern 2000.

7 Here it is important to distinguish the question whether a given feature is appropriate content from the further question whether the content, once fixed, is an appropriate thing to assert or utter in the context.

8 In addition to his descriptive linguistic research, Lakoff makes a number of radical claims that challenge most of "Western philosophy" which he charges is based on a falsifying model of literal language; this critique has had little, if any, impact on philosophers. His work does, however, raise a number of important methodological questions. Should evidence consist primarily in one rather than another kind of metaphor – poetic or ordinary? Is metaphor a mapping of one conceptual domain onto another, or should metaphors be primarily understood as predicative, or class-inclusion, statements? Connected to this second question is the status of similarity or resemblance as a 'ground' for metaphorical interpretation. Since various critiques in the 1960s, the notion of similarity has been rehabilitated throughout the cognitive sciences, largely due to Amos Tversky 1977. At the same time, its application to metaphor has been challenged on the grounds that metaphors are not relational or comparative in form but rather devices for expressing novel, ad hoc categories. See Glucksberg 2001, Gibbs 1994, and Glucksberg and Keysar 1990, 1993.

9 Similarly, to report someone's metaphor, either the reporter can try to express only the content of the original utterance without replicating its metaphorical character or, if he wishes to preserve the metaphorical mode of expression, he must also recover the presuppositions of the original context in order to preserve the content. For additional constraints carried by metaphorical character, or meaning, see Stern 2000 and, for criticism, Bezuidenhout (2001).

10 In Stern (2000) I compare "essential metaphors" of this kind to John Perry's (1979) "essential indexicals," arguing that in both cases it is the meaning, or character of the respective indexical or metaphor that carries the additional information relevant to the explanation.

11 This question should be distinguished from whether, and how, linguistic metaphors are pictorial. On the pictorial dimension of metaphor, see Moran (1989); Stern (2000).

12 My deep thanks to Ted Cohen for critical comments on the penultimate draft of this essay.

Further Reading

Many of the primary sources on metaphor referred to in this chapter are included in two good anthologies: Johnson (1981) which includes most of the older classics (e.g., Beardsley, Black, T. Cohen, Davidson, and Lakoff and Johnson) and Ortony (1993) which focusses on more recent work (e.g., by Searle, Sadock, Boyd, Gibbs, Glucksberg and Keysar, and Lakoff), and illustrates the deep impact of the cognitive sciences on current research. For a philosophical introduction, I would recommend the excellent overviews by Moran (1996) and T. Cohen (forthcoming). Among books, a philosophically acute and very readable monograph is Fogelin (1988). Other useful book-length studies are Cooper (1986) which defends a Davidsonian approach and Kittay (1987) who employs semantic field theory to elaborate a Black-like approach to metaphor. White (1996) presents by far the best philosophical treatment of complex metaphors in literature and poetry as well as an original analysis of the structure of metaphorical interpretation. For a detailed presentation of the semantic context-dependent account sketched in this chapter, see Stern (2000).