METAPHOR, MEANING AND COMPREHENSION

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One of the most suggestive and at one time provocative remarks on the nature of metaphor was M. Black's claim that

> It would be more illuminating (...) to say that the metaphor creates the similarity rather than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing [1].

In an effort to dismantle comparison and in general substitution theories of metaphor. Black proposed in a later essay what be called the 'strong creativity thesis' for metaphor [2]. It treated metaphors as the bearers of an irreducible cognitive content that was typically new and created by the metaphor itself. Thus, against those who claimed that the meaning of a metaphor can be expressed by a literal statement at the cheap cost of losing nothing but its ornamental component.

Black argued that what he called authentic, interesting metaphors (strong metaphors), admitted of no literal substitution or equivalent. If metaphor was to have any value apart from the decorative role assigned to it by substitution theories, then it must be the fulfilling of a cognitive function: the bridging of the gap between the old and the new, the known and the unkown [3]. Black conceived

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[1] M. Black, «Metaphor». *Models and Metaphors.* Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press: 1962 (a), p. 37.

[2] M. Black, «More about Metaphors». *Metaphor and Thought.* In A. Ortony (ed.), C.U.P. 1979.

[3] Here is an example of how metaphorical expressions are analysed under a susbstitution theory:
1. John is an old fox
2. John is sly/ John and foxes are similar in that they both are sly.
The speaker utters (1) intending to convey (2). The obvious question here is, why does he not go directly about? his business and utter (2), if that is what he means? On this view metaphors are superfluous linguistic devices which entertain, 'produce a shock of agreeable surprise', or in the most intricate cases, provide a challenge to the reader, who must look for the actual intended meaning. As in a riddle. By contrast, what Black is thinking of are metaphors which force us to establish structural correspondences between the principal and the subsidiary subject with the latter guiding the structur-

of metaphor as consisting of a metaphorical focus —the subsidiary subject— and a literal frame —the principal subject—. Both were to be thought of as systems of associated commonplaces (what he later on called 'implicative complexes') rather than individual terms, in which the implications attached to the focus are projected on to the primary subject, which is thus restructured in a new way and seen in a new light:

> The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man a 'wolf' is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on. Each of these implied assertions has now to be made to fit the principal subject (the man) either in normal or in abnormal senses. If the metaphor is at all appropriate, this can be done —up to a point at least. A suitable reader will be led by the wolf— system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject. But these implications *will* not be those comprised in the commonplaces *normally* implied by literal uses of 'man'. The new implications must be determined by the pattern of implications associated with the literal uses of the word 'wolf'. Any human traits that can be talked about in 'wolf language' will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot, will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others —in short, *organizes* our view of man—

This is the process he called 'metaphorical interaction'. In the later essay he expanded on the idea that metaphos are cognitive instruments, primary tools in understanding and the growth of knowledge. His strong creativity thesis assigned metaphors a special kind of meaning resulting from the interaction of the terms in it, and which

a) is 'new' of 'creative', not inferrable from the standard lexicon,

b) is not paraphrasable, at least not completely,

c) brings about concetual innovations and therefore generates new insight and knowledge.

This applied to 'all but the most trivial metaphors'.

Black goes to great lengths to show us how this can be so. First, he tells us, it is useful to think of the metaphorical thought, at least in part, as the thinking of something A as something else B. We have this kind of thinking when we try and see a geometrical figure —like the Star of David— as some other figure —like a regular hexagon or three superimposed parallelograms—. This is what is involved in understanding the less interesting kinds of metaphors, for here, there is no conceptual innovation, the hexagon and the parallelograms we perceived being 'just those (se) had antecedently learnt to draw and recognize'. There is no real discovery here, the same as when we interpret trivial or dead metaphors like 'His nose is a carrot' or 'John is an old fox'. The metaphors Black is trying to characterize require a much stronger imaginative effort, similar to that we have to make when

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ing, and revealing aspects of the former which were unknown to the hearer at least, and which give a different status to the terms involved. And hence the cognitive value he ascribed to metaphorical expressions.

we try to imagine a triangle composed of three curved segments or a straight line viewed as a collapsed triangle with its vertex on the base. This is more like what we have to do in understanding metaphors like 'Marriage is a zero-sum game' or 'Man is a thinking reed'. Our conceptions of marriage and man have to be altered and strained under the pressure of the metaphorical foci (zero-sum 'game' and 'reed'), the same as when we try to conceive of a triangle as a straight line. Compare these examples with (1) and (2) below:

1) Marriage is a collaborative work of art [4].
2) Man is a leaf in the hands of Fate.

In each metaphor there is a different conceptualization, a perspective on each term we did not have before we heard these metaphors. This is why for Black there is nothing surprising in claiming that

> metaphors enable us to see aspects of reality that the metaphor's production helps to constitute [5].

Metaphorical expressions can do their job because, as he argues, conceptual boundaries are not rigid or impermeable. And also because the world around us is only a world under a certain description, or a world 'seen from a certain perspective' and 'some metaphors can create such a perspective'. Black's definition of metaphor

> roughly speaking, as an instrument for drawing implications grounded in perceived analogies of structure between two subjects belonging to two different domains [6]

which sometimes 'impresses, strikes or seizes its producer' has been very productive, for it has been applied to theories of learning and education in general, philosophy, science and psychology. But what is the theory of meaning that this view of metaphor presupposes and also can it stand the test of a strict semantic theory?

In a controversial essay on what metaphors mean, D. Davidson claimed that there is no room in a theory of meaning for an account of metaphorical meaning different from the literal:

> metaphors mean what the words in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more [7].

If he is right, for a sentence like (3) below, the same as for any other sentence in the language, we have its meaning specified by the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for its truth. In

3) Richard is a gorilla

I am asserting that Richard is a member of the set of all gorillas, and therefore the sentence is true if and only if Richard is a gorilla. That whoever uttered

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[4] I borrowed this example from G. Lakoff & M. Johnson's *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 (a).

[5] M. Black, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[6] Ibid., p. 32.

[7] D. Davidson, «What Metaphors Mean' in *Reference, Truth and Reality*. M. Platts (ed.), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1980, p. 238.

the sentence must have had the intention to convey something else by this obvious flouting of the maxims of conversation is something that lies outside the scope of a semantic theory. When we talk of the meaning of a metaphor, this is, according to Davidso, as far as we can go. Clearly, what he is doing is simply applying the distinction between meaning and use to the study of metaphor. The effects that the 'imaginative employment of words' have on us need not concern, in principle, a theory of meaning. When we talk about the special meaning of a metaphor we are simply blurring this fundamental distinction. All talk of metaphors as the conveyors of ideas, or as the bearers of a special cognitive content, meaning or truth, arises from a failure to distinguish between meaning and use[8]. But if Davidson is right, what can we make of Black's proposal? Can we accept his suggestions while at the same time holding a Davidsonian theoretical frame? Are both views reconciliable at all?

Let's take a more detailed look at the conflicting aspects in both approaches. Both Black and Davidson agree on the impossibility of paraphrasing a metaphor's special meaning but on totally opposite grounds. For Black, paraphrases fail to capture the cognitive content of the metaphor:

> the relevant weakness of the relevant paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit; it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did[9].

Another reason is that while the metaphor is open-ended in nature, the paraphrase is always too determinate:

> Since we must necessarily read 'behind the words' we cannot set firm bounds to the admissible interpretations: ambiguity is a necessary byproduct of the metaphor's suggestiveness[10].

But the same arguments support the opposite conclusion in Davidson's view. If the content of a metaphor cannot be put into words, then, by definition, it is not a 'content': it must be something else:

> The usual view wants to hold that a metaphor does something no plain prose can do, and on the other hand it wants to explain what a metaphor does by appealing to a cognitive content —just the sort of thing plain prose is designed to express[11].

From this Davidson concludes that it is not the meaning of the metaphor that we find difficult to paraphrase or grasp but the 'effects metaphors have on us':

> The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself[12].

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[8] See Ibíd., pp. 239-240.

[9] M. Black, *op. cit.,* p. 46.

[10] Ibíd., p. 30.

[11] D. Davidson, *op. cit.,* p. 251.

[12] Bis.

There is no denying that metaphor makes us notice things and aspects of reality we had not discoverd before, but no by 'standing for or expressing the fact'. The paraphrase fails when we want it to capture what the metaphor brings to our attention. Because that is not finite in scope —which is just what Black was saying when he talked about the ambiguity of metaphors— or propositional in nature. For if it were, it should be expressible in literal language. Metaphors trigger off all kinds of thoughts, suggestions, images and feelings. The amount and quality of the implications one may draw, the thoughts it may provoke, the correspondences it may invite us to find between the terms involved, cannot be called the metaphor's cognitive content. As Levinson claims, there is nothing denigrating in approaching metaphor as a use of language and therefore as a pragmatic phenomenon. What we have to do is simply apply the 'division of labour' between semantics and pragmatics to the study of metaphor:

> A pragmatic approach will be based on the assumption that the metaphorical content of the utterance will not be derived by principles of semantic interpretation; rather the semantics will just provide a characterization of the literal meaning or conventional content of the expressions involved, and from this, together with details of the context, the pragmatics will have to provide the metaphorical interpretation [13].

Metaphors are, no doubt, cognitively helpful. But we can only speak of the cognitive çontent of an utterance,

> in so far as it is capable of being asserted to make a truth claim [14]

as Warner argues. He thinks, very much in the same line as Davidson, that Black goes wrong because he

> appears to be running together the thesis that good metaphors play a distinctive and significant role in enabling us to understand ourselves and the world with the thesis that they convey information unparaphrasable by any non-metaphorical sentence [15].

Davidson's theory of meaning —if correct— need not demolish an interactive theory of metaphor. Maybe, all we would have to do is reformulate what the cognitive value of metaphor consists in. Rather than actually creating new entities, metaphor hints at the possibility of doing so, for logically, if a new entity has been created —of whatever kind— we give it a name and it immediately forms part of what we have agreed to call ordinary language. Rather than bearing a cognitive content, metaphors might be said to be the bearers of cognitive suggestions, indefinite in range and often vague, ambiguous and imprecise. If these suggestions or intimations can be spelled out and are generally accepted, they soon become conventional and they 'die' into the 'mediocrity' of ordinary language.

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[13] S. C. Levinson, *Pragmatics,* C.U.P. 1983, p. 156.

[14] M. Warner, «Black's metaphors» in *British Journal of Aesthetics,* 13, p. 4 (1973), p. 368.

[15] Ibíd., p. 369.

It must be said that Davidson's theory of metaphor is not a fascinating theory. But that was clear from the beginning, for in the first place, he never claimed to have an aswer for the workings of metaphor. The interest of the points he makes lies in that they bring into the open one of the main wources of confusion in the literature on metaphor, namely, the lack of terminological clarity and precision. There is far too much talk on the meaning of metaphor that relies on an unfortunately non-existent agreement on the scope of the term 'meaning'. That is why Davidson's article is a very useful starting point.

In view of what we have just seen, there are I think, only two escape routes for the study of metaphor: either Davidson is right and the distinction meaning use can and must be maintained, in which case metaphors are exploitations of pragmatic principles in combination with certain cognitive capacities —like thinking analogically— or else he is wrong from beginning to end, and what we need is a radically different theory of meaning where there is no sharp divisory line separating the specifically linguistic content of the expressions in the language from other kinds of information gathered from the context, our memory, and in general our general knowledge of the world. I do not think it is possible to maintain the distinction meaning/use and at the same time talk about the metaphorical meanings of expressions or their metaphorical truth. However one very often finds that recent works on metaphor fail to keep up these most basic distinctions. Searle illustrates this type of confusion to perfection [16]. In his article on metaphor he starts off by establishing a distinction between sentence/word meaning and speaker's utterance meaning. Metaphor belongs in the second, along with other uses of language like indirect speech acts or irony. However, as soon as he attempts to specify what metaphor consists in he proves unable to keep the two notions apart. First, he proposes that in analysing metaphor we must have two sentences, one for the metaphorical assertion as uttered by the speaker, the other its paraphrase, expressing literally what the speaker meant by the metaphor. This type of approach, which Black had criticised twenty years before, might not have been so unfortunate had he not rushed to claim that

> in each case the speaker's metaphorical assertion (MET) will be true, if and only if the corresponding assertion using the (PAR) sentence is true [17].

An example of this would be (4) and (4') below:
(4) Richard is a gorilla.
(4') Richard is fierce, nasty and prone to violence.

Unlike ordinary sentences, (4) does not have its truth conditions and value specified by the meanings of the elements in it. Searle claims. For him, (4) is not a false assertion as it should be if taken at face value. To decide on this we have to know first what the truth value for (4') is. Here I discern two problems. In the first place the choice of metaphoric sentence —a highly conventional case of metaphor, hardly illustrative of how a new metaphor might possibly work— is

[16] J. Searle, «Metaphor» in *Expression & Meaning.* C.U.P. 1979.
[17] Ibíd., p. 82.

important to make Searle's point, for here he has a ready-made paraphrase and we all agree that is the correct paraphrase, for even the dictionary backs it up. Had he used a real metaphor he would have had to face all the problems connected with its paraphrasing and the assigning of a truth value to it. There is of course the fact that on hearing or reading a metaphor the only sentence we can count on is the metaphor itself, and therefore the only meaning —in the strict sense of the term— and certainly the only set of truth conditions we can talk about. Secondly, by assigning two different sets of truth conditions —one for the sentence as taken literally and the other for the sentence as taken metaphorically. Searle is clearly reducing metaphor to polysemy, for it a sentence can have two different sets of truth conditions, that sentence has two literal meanings assigned to it by the rules of the language. The big mistake in Searle's approach is to assign truth values to speaker's meaning, in which case it cannot be distinguished from literal meaning.

But Searle is not the only one. E.R.M. McCormac offers what he calls a formal. version of the interaction theory of metaphor attempting to integrate the semantic, syntactic and cognitive elements in metaphor [18].

He claims, in keeping with Black, that metaphorical language is a means of expressing cognitive contents which cannot be expressed any other way without sacrificing their creativity. When we paraphrase metaphors we are simply reducing them to analogies. He takes up another commonplace about metaphor which Davidson proved to be as wrong as that of the special meaning for metaphorical expressions and which is related to it: by juxtaposing 'normally unassociated referents' metaphor creates new meanings. And therefore 'metaphors both depend on and produce polysemy' for 'unless a word can be taken in more than one sense, metaphor is impossible'. When the metaphor is widely accepted, and therefore conventionalized, it becomes part of ordinary language. But if this is so, then there is nothing special in metaphor and all we have to do to capture their non-literal meaning is simply wait until the metaphor dies. For example, 'He was burned up' has now as one of its conventional senses, the reading 'He was very angry'. But if the coiner of the metaphor had been asked how he liked the paraphrase, he would have most probably complained that he meant something more, or different or more special, but not just that. He probably pictured 'fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears' as Davidson says. And he wonders, 'Why doesn't «He was burned up» as now used and meant mean exactly what the fresh metaphor once did? [19] Again we must conclude that whatever is so special in metaphor, is not its meaning.

As a final example of this type of confusion arising from using the term 'meaning' loosely, I will take a very quick look at another very recent work on the topic: E. F. Kittay's *Metaphor* (1987). She is all for the irreducibility of the metaphor's cognitive content, again along with Black. Here once more we find the type of formulation that Davidson was trying to avoid:

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[18] E. R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor,* M.I.T. Press, 1987.

[19] D. Davidson, *op. cit.,* p. 244.

> The cognitive significance of metaphor arises froms its capacity to restructure or to induce a structure on a given content domain. Such structuring or restructuring will yield many implicated propositions, some literal some metaphorical. But no one statement from this explication will capture the full meaning of the metaphor. We can give an exposition of a metaphor, but not a paraphrase —not if the metaphor is still a live metaphor and has not collapsed into literality [20].

That metaphor works its wonders by the restructuring of a conceptual domain by another is an interesting point to make, first made by Black and now supported by evidence some psychologists found on the way we actually interpret metaphorical sentences [21].

My only quarrel is with the terminolgy used here. Kittay's approach to metaphor depends on a distinction between first and second-order meaning. First-order meaning is given by the literal and conventional senses of the utterance, while second-order meaning is a function of it. Metaphor belongs in this second kind of meaning because 'it breaks certain rules governing the literal and conventional sense of the terms'. Metaphors are thus, movements away from a certain convention that belong in another territory with rules of its own. Metaphor is at the heart of our conceptual system —yes, but how?— and therefore concerns meaning as well as use. In her approach, literal language is not equipped to handle the conceptual innovations metaphor brings about.

One of the arguments she finds supporting her claim that metaphors are semantic in nature —against Davidson is account— concerns the role that metaphors are supposed to play in determining the truth value of a given utterance:

> whether a sentence is to be understood literally or metaphorically may alter the truth value of that sentence the truth value of a sentence will depend on whether or not it is given a metaphorical interpretation [22].

To illustrate this she analyses Davidson's example of the New York Mirror headline 'Hemingway lost in Africa' used to suggest that he was dead, since it was reported that his plane had been 'sighted. wrecked. in Africa'. When it turned out that he was alive, 'the Mirror left the headline to be taken literally'. Davidson uses this example to illustrate the point that concerning the falsity of metaphors 'what matters is not actual falsehood but that the sentence be taken to be false'. It is clear that the context surrounding the Mirror's headline strongly suggested that Hemingway was dead rather than lost. Kittay argues that since Hemingway might well have been lost before dying, the sentence has two different sets of truth conditions. That is, it would not be true to say that it is the fact that the literal interpretation is not applicable that triggers the metaphorical interpretation, for its being true does not preclude the possibility of interpreting it metaphorically at the same time. From this she jumps to the conclusion that

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[20] E. K. Kittay, *Metaphor,* Clarendon Press. Oxford, 1987, p. 37.

[21] See R. D. Verbrugge & N. S. McCarrell, «Metaphoric Comprehension: Studies in Reminding and Resembling» in *Cognitive Psychology*, 9, 1977.

[22] E. F. Kittay, *op. cit.,* p. 37.

...how we assign truth conditions to a sentence depends on whether we understand it literally or metaphorically [23].

Against this kind of reasoning we have the same arguments we found against Searle: to claim that a metaphor has a bearing on truth conditions is to equate it with polysemy. In fact, the dictionary lists a reading —among many— for 'lost' which makes it synonymous with 'killed'. It is precisely because 'killed' is one of the conventional senses of 'lost' that we can talk about two different sets of truth conditions for the Mirror headline, while leaving it for the context to disolve the ambiguity that this may create. Kittay herself, concedes that this can be a case of ambiguity in which the roles of semantics and pragmatics could be divided in the way I have just mentioned. But she is not prepared to give up her claim that this kind of argument could harm Davidson's formulation and insists that

> Davidson cannot be right both in asserting that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth conditions and his claim that a metaphorical sentence has no meaning apart from its literal meaning [24].

This is a very feeble argument for there is no evidence that Davidson would object to giving conventional meanings —not only literal meanings— a truth value. Besides, it shows that Kittay is playing a double game, for by granting a metaphorical meaning to 'Hemingway lost in Africa' instead of simply talking about one of the readings of the utterance with a metaphorical reading to it now lost, or almost so, she is accepting that metaphors can be given literal interpretations and have truth values, which is the thesis she set out to dismantle.

I hope these examples have proved how useful Davidson's clarifications are in deciding what direction we should *not* pursue in the study of metaphor. This is only a negative claim, of course, and there is still the question of the psychological reality of a theory of meaning like his. There is growing evidence that the meanings of words and sentences cannot be fixed in independence of the sentential textual and situational context in which they are uttered. And this is precisely the strength of an interaction theory of metaphor if handled correctly. Meaning and truth may well be forced to change their status in the face of the results obtained in experiments on memory and comprehension. I just want to insist that even so, Davidson's notions are theoretically useful because of their coherence.

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[23] Ibíd., pp. 103-104.
[24] E. F. Kittay, *op. cit.*, p. 102.