

ON THE SEMANTICS OF METAPHOR

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The article discusses the problem of metaphor from the semantical point of view, at the lexical level. After having explained why do metaphors represent a touch stone of any semantical theory, and after having given a brief survey of possible theoretical solutions of the problem, the author exposes her own view of metaphor based on late Wittgenstein's theory of meaning.

On the assumption that there should be no artificial break between semantics and pragmatics the author argues that the same semantical, pragmatical and epistemological principles govern the production and interpretation of literal and metaphorical language. The difference between literal and metaphorical is understood as a token, and not a type difference, depending on what is considered to be the common meaning of a word. Metaphor is defined as a semantic innovation, nomination, realized by the extension of literal meaning. Arguments for her thesis the author finds in the analysis of the processes of language acquisition.

As a theoretical topic metaphor is derived from rhetoric, where it was defined as one of the tropes, a figure of speech the function of which was adornment, decoration of discourse. Although the question of metaphor was raised within this particular domain it has not remained limited to the special interests of rhetoric, but has grown to an overwhelming topic embracing problems of linguistics, art theory, Psychology, philosophy.

From the point of view of rhetoric and poetics metaphor is interesting as one of the means of providing images for concepts, of dressing plain thought into a picturesque garment. Within this field metaphor is appreciated for its iconic character; it has even been defined as »a formula for the construction of icons«.¹

As one of the main characteristics of Poetic language, metaphor was introduced into more general aesthetic debates about the truth claim of poetic language, as well as into the debates concerning the productive function of fiction. The problem of metaphorical reference, namely the question: What are metaphorical expressions about? appears to be connected with the general problem of the reference of poetic discourse and with its ontological commitments, i.e. With ontological questions about the existence or nonexistence of the entities to which metaphorical expressions and hence — fiction in general — refer. The putative

answer to the question whether the suspension of ordinary reference in metaphorical expressions generates, at the same time, new, extra-ordinary reference, i.e. whether the constitution of metaphorical meaning implies the creation of a new reality, effects far reaching consequences in aesthetics, ontology and in the philosophy of language.

One possible approach to the topic is to focus on the cognitive aspect, questioning whether »understanding one thing in terms of another« (2) brings new insights and what are the psychic mechanisms that enable such an understanding. Thus, metaphor becomes one of the important issues in epistemology and in its scientific counterpart — cognitive psychology. Within this field metaphors are recognized as being function in the formation of concepts, the metaphorical process is paired with the imagination, the production of images that represents the first step in the »movement towards the genus«.³ To acknowledge the function of metaphors in the formation and restructuring of our concepts means to assert their influence on our systems of everyday beliefs, as well as their importance in science. As far as science overlaps with »an affair of the imagination«,⁴ metaphors play in it an important role, analogue to the use of models or to the paradigmswitch, i.e. to other methods of scientific discovery.

Within the domain of epistemology metaphor is treated primarily as a matter of thought, whereas its linguistic expression is considered to be no more than a reflection of the fundamental process that occurs in the mental realm. From the epistemological point of view the solution to the problem of metaphor lies in the identification of the cognitive process that precedes its verbal formulation. Linguists and philosophers who confirm the primacy of the mental sphere pay little attention to the linguistic realisation of metaphorical meaning which is said to be constituted at the prelingual stage.

On the other hand, those philosophers and linguists who claim the primacy of language, treat metaphor as a matter of »mere language«, namely as a semantical problem. From this point of view metaphor is recognized as a »semantic twist at the level of sense«,⁵ a clash produced by the deviation from the literal code. The most important problem in this domain is the relation between literal and metaphorical meaning and it is this very question that we intend to discuss here. This restriction to the domain of semantics in our case does not imply any final decision about the supposed primacy of language. The semantical approach is chosen as the most elementary one. Namely, since metaphor is recognised primarily as a specific word combination, it seems the problem should first be solved at this level. We hope that the proposed solution of the semantical problem will also have some implications in other domains and thus give a clue to a holistic account.

To shift the explanation of metaphor from the prelingual to the lingual stage means to identify metaphorical meaning as a linguistic event and to imply certain linguistic strategies that account for its

production and interpretation. Though selfevident this task turns out to be difficult to fulfil. On the one hand, metaphors are recognized as the deviations from the standard code, so the theory of meaning that accounts for the literal meaning soon gets into trouble trying to explain how metaphors work. On the other hand, their use is widespread not only in poetry and science but also in our ordinary language; in fact many literal meanings are derived from metaphorical ones, so metaphors cannot possibly be considered to be of marginal interest to semantics. This is why metaphors represent a touchstone of any semantical theory.

In its most elementary version the dilemma could be formulated as follows: the theory of meaning should either deny the opposition literal-metaphorical, or acknowledge it, thus being compelled to develop different semantical strategies that account for the difference of meaning. Hence, the recognition of the opposition literal — metaphorical seems to undermine the possibility of a unified semantics and to lead to a dualistic one. On the presumption that a dualistic semantics represents an implausible solution, we intend to reinterpret the relation literal-metaphorical in a way that would enable its explanation from the point of view of a unified theory of meaning, i.e. we hope it is possible to give an adequate account of both — the literal and the metaphorical meaning using the same category tools and still preserving their opposition.

The variety of interpretations of the relation: literal-metaphorical, reflects the variety of existing theories of meaning. The opposition literal-metaphorical is denied by the unified theories of meaning which choose either the literal or the metaphorical meaning as a paradigm meaning, treating the other as a semantical delusion, a decline from the model meaning, an informative loss. These theories imply a very strong normative, valuative aspect, thus exhibiting their oneness. They succeed in giving an account of one type of meaning refusing to acknowledge the semantical role of the other.

The continental tradition (Cassirer, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-ponty, Derrida) that considers language to be a metaphor of being, chooses metaphor as a paradigm of meaning that reveals the true nature of language. Hence, poetic discourse — with its opaqueness, i.e. impossibility to separate meanings from their exemplification in words, with its ambiguity, semantical density, possibility of multiple interpretation — is recognized as an exclusive case of authentic discourse from which literal meanings, dead metaphors, are but a decline.

The Anglo-american, analytical tradition, on the contrary, treats literal meaning as a paradigm case and metaphorical meaning as a deviation. Based on the notions of objective reference, compositionality, transparency of meaning, unambiguity, these theories treat metaphor as an abuse or a specific use of literal expressions. To the philosophers of the Vienna circle (Carnap) metaphor is but a meaningless symptom of

emotions; according to a more recent, Davidson's interpretation, metaphor belongs to the domain of use and can be compared with other uses such as »assertion, hinting, lying, promising or criticizing«. ⁶ Although, according to Davidson, its function is to evoke pictures and »inspire and prompt our insight«, ⁷ metaphor achieves its aim simply, by making a literal statement, hence such an effect is produced without any parallel semantical changes.

From the point of view of the above mentioned theories of meaning the opposition literal-metaphorical does not represent a semantical problem. Where there is only one principle case of meaning, the common problem of finding the literal equivalent of metaphorical expressions becomes a pseudo-problem. As there could be no money exchange where a single currency is in the circulation, the literal paraphrase of metaphorical meaning turns out to be unnecessary and impossible.

The refusal to take an exclusive position in semantics leads to compromises — to the theories that acknowledge the opposition literal-metaphorical and search for its explanation. The usual starting point is literal meaning as a standard case, whereas metaphor is recognized as a meaningful disturbance of the standard code. Though posing a semantical problem, metaphor is here acknowledged as having a meaning, so special techniques have to be invented to account for its semantic role.

Traditionally, metaphor if referred to as »saying one thing and meaning another«, as a transposed meaning, an indirect designation that is realized when we substitute metaphorical expression by a literal one. This traditional, substitutional approach sounds familiar, but on closer inspection it reveals its unreliability. It gives no account of the following questions: How do we recognize the violation of the literal code? Is metaphorical meaning to be identified with literal incompatibility or with a new (literal) compatibility? Is the new semantic pertinence dependent on the literal meaning of words that form a metaphorical expression? If the new semantic pertinence is identified with some other literal meanings i. e. with a literal paraphrase, what exactly is the criterion of the substitution?

Beside these deficiencies, the substitutional approach has a more basic one: although seemingly confirming metaphors as meaningful, in fact it denies their semantic function. It reduces metaphors to no more than a mask that when taken off reveals the true face of meaning, which in principle can only be literal. Thus the positive answer to the question concerning the possibility of literal paraphrase, that was initially understood as the justification of the semantic role of metaphors, turns out to be its denial. The refusal to recognize metaphor as a semantic model follows not only from the necessity of literal paraphrase — that makes sense of otherwise meaningless expression — but from its very possibility. If the so called »metaphorical« interpretation of an expression that deviates from the literal code has no chance

but to return to the literal code, metaphors produce no semantic innovation. In order to be accepted as having a semantic function metaphors should neither be reduced to their literal paraphrase, nor should in any way dependent on it.

The discussions about the inadequacy of literal paraphrase are usually raised by the analysis of poetic discourse that insists on the creative function of art proclaiming the »heresy of paraphrase«. Such disputes could with the same enthusiasm be focused on the question of catachresis. The principle, namely, that of semantic innovation is the same. In the case of catachresis metaphor fills in a lexical gap and starts to function as a part of the literal vocabulary. Since it stands for a semantic innovation that has no counterpart in the existing literal meanings, it is impossible to find its literal equivalent. Since it turns into a new literal meaning, its literal paraphrase also proves to be unnecessary. Thus, catachresis, as well as metaphors in literature that are open to multiple interpretations, prove that their assumed literal equivalents represent neither necessary, nor a sufficient condition of our ability to invent and understand metaphors.

Such a claim seems to imply different semantical strategies in the case of metaphorical and literal meaning, so recent theories of metaphor, that find the traditional approach inadequate, engage themselves in working out these strategies. The substitutional view considered metaphorical meaning to be a mere denomination, or a transposed meaning, i.e. to be constituted at the lexical or the syntagmatic level, thus capable of being replaced by some analogue literal expression. The refutation of the substitutional view in modern theories, introduced mainly by Black's interactional theory, is characterised by the claim that metaphorical meaning was constituted on a supra-lexical level, namely that metaphor should be regarded primarily as a matter of predication.

The proposed shift of the constitution of metaphorical meaning to the level of statement was induced by the failure of the attempt to explain it at the lexical level. If we want to avoid the consequence of a dualistic semantics and try to explain the lexical meaning according to a single, in this case — literal — model, to which metaphor proves not to be reducible, the next plausible step would be to presuppose some supra-lexical factors as relevant for the constitution of metaphorical meaning. Now the questions arise: How many linguistic variables do we need to take into account for the explanation of metaphorical meaning? What portions of language, of its competence and performance should be considered?

The way modern theories of metaphor answer these questions could easily be used as the ground for their classification. Thus, besides the interactional theory that treats metaphorical meaning as being constituted at the level of statement, we distinguish theories that consider metaphor to be a matter of discourse — be it a text, a dialogue, a speech act or a language game. Whereas Black defines metaphorical meaning as

»the system of associated commonplaces evoked by the interaction of the principal and the subsidiary subject«,⁸ theories of another group proclaim semantic rules to be insufficient for its explanation. According to them the constitution of metaphorical meaning implies general rules of interpretation (hermeneutics), i.e. general pragmatic rules (Searle). According to Searle's theory, which is but a refined version of the substitutional theory,⁹ interpretation of a metaphorical expression involves a list of pragmatic rules that enable us to substitute meanings literal expression by speaker's utterance meaning, i.e. by another, adequate literal meaning. Such an explanation gives account of our understanding of metaphors shifting it simply to the domain of pragmatics, without disturbing the literal semantic model. Stressing the importance of pragmatic rules in our understanding of what words actually, mean. Searle does not recognize the semantic role of the metaphorical expressions, but treats them as pragmatic problems.

Some authors [J. Stern, for instance¹⁰] assume that not only our semantic, but also our pragmatic competence cannot explain our understanding of metaphors. They suggest that the interpretation of the metaphors analogous to the interpretation of indexical terms, must involve some extralinguistic factors, such as perceiving and understanding of the situational context, the interpreter's associations and mental abilities, his relation to the speaker etc.

In such a way the problem metaphor becomes more and more vague. Trying to restrict our problem to the domain of semantics we ended by stating that the solution of the semantical problem implies the pragmatical, and even more generally the epistemological approach. In the attempt to fulfil the impossible task of getting out of the dead-end street let me repeat once again with John Searle that »The problem« of metaphor is either very difficult or very easy.¹¹ According to Searle the problem of metaphor as »very easy«.

Although the full account of metaphor should treat it as a matter of discourse, it can also be analysed within the frames of semantics, as a matter of »mere language«. Metaphor indeed is a matter of »mere language«, it is the matter of language par excellence. Metaphors are one of the most important means of semantic innovation, of the extension of our vocabulary. By »teaching an old word new tricks«¹² metaphor, if not mere periphrasis, is not a means of denomination, but rather that of nomination. Opposing Davidson we may state that metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and something more.¹³ This additional meaning is a new Paradigme and as such cannot be replaced by any already existing common meaning. By using one term to refer to the supposed referent of the other, metaphor extends its Pattern of meaning, virtually producing new literal meaning of the term used. Whether the semantic innovation produced by metaphorical nomination will become a part of our literal semantic

competence depends on the habits of the language community, as well as on nomination does.

Treating metaphor as an extension of literal meaning enables us to avoid the trap of a dualistic semantics as well as the presupposition that understanding metaphors involves some extra linguistic or extralinguistic knowledge. Stating that the same semantic, pragmatic and epistemological principles govern the production and interpretation of literal and metaphorical meaning seems to overlook their opposition. Indeed, metaphorical and literal meaning should not be considered as two sides of a single coin, but rather as two extreme positions in a continuum of possible uses. Thus, the difference literal — metaphorical may be interpreted as the difference in degree, token and not a type difference.¹⁴ Consider, for instance, the following list of expressions: blue eyes, bright eyes, glittering eyes, weary eyes, golden eyes, eyes of experience, innocent eyes, inward eyes, eye of heaven, eyes-pearls, hey-days of eyes... Although we are positive about the literacy of the first expression and the metaphoricity of the last one, it is difficult to draw the sharp line of distinction; it is difficult to decide where does the literal end and the metaphorical begin. Whether we are going to declare an expression to be literal depends on the fact whether we recognize it as common.

Our view of metaphor rests on late Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of a word is equal to its use, the idea that there should be no gap between semantics and pragmatics. If we understand the meaning of a word as the pattern of possible uses, not definitely fixed, but open to new ones, the metaphorical extension of literal meaning does not represent an extravagant case. Metaphors are partially context independent, leaning on the literal part of the terms, whereas the understanding of the produced semantic innovation is context dependent to the degree that any new meaning formation is. Davidson's example with a friend from Saturn¹⁵ who cannot tell learning a new literal usage of a word from understanding a metaphor shows that there is indeed no principle, difference between the two. Although Davidson used his example as an argument against novelty as the criterion, we assume that it on the contrary represents an argument in support of our assumption. It proves that the difference between literal and metaphorical is gradual, depending on what is considered as common use of a term.

The fact that a metaphorical meaning may be understood as the acquisition of a new literal meaning, as well as the fact that a drill in the use of literal language may be understood as a metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson report of a foreign student who understood the word »solution« (of the Problem) as a »chemical« metaphor¹⁶) shows that understanding literal and metaphorical meaning is based on the same semantic and pragmatic principles, shows that the difference literal metaphorical is not fixed, but relative, gradual, depending on our general

linguistic abilities, on the general amount of knowledge, and on our self-confidence as speakers of the language.

Processes of language acquisition prove that understanding metaphors presupposes no special semantic or pragmatic competence other than the one that is needed for learning literal language. On the other hand they show that there is a difference between understanding metaphors and recognizing them as metaphors. Children, for instance have no problem in understanding metaphors, in fact they are very prone to produce metaphors themselves not being aware that such expressions may not be understood literally. Speaking, we are usually not aware of our use of metaphorical expressions although we have no problem in producing and understanding them.¹⁷ Only on rare occasions do we recognize an expression as a metaphor. Such a recognition presupposes our knowledge about metaphor as a figure of speech which we usually gain at school. Without such a knowledge metaphorical expression may be recognized as »nouserious«. Recognizing metaphor as metaphor presupposes that both, the speaker and the interpreter, share the same linguistic habits, that they agree in what they consider to be the common way of speaking.

On the other hand, if an expression, once understood as a metaphor, becomes a part of our ordinary language, if it becomes a »metaphor that we live by«¹⁸ it will neither be recognized as metaphor any more, nor will it function as a metaphor any longer.¹⁹ Linguistic analysis may discover the metaphorical origine of many terms which we no longer consider metaphorical. »Dead« metaphors witness that their process of dying was not abrupt, but gradual, depending on the frequency and duration of their use.

The case of catachresis poses another problem, namely, how is it possible that we still recognize the metaphorical origin of a term once accepted as literal? Catachresis is recognized as a »dead« metaphor thanks to parallel uses in different contexts, in which case we are prone to think of the more »concrete« term as primary («to give money«), and the more »abstract« one («to give a talk«) as its metaphorical extension. Such evidence still does not imply objective reference as the basis of meaning. Reverse cases in which a more »abstract« term is considered as common and a more »concrete« one as its metaphorical extension are possible as well. Metaphorical meaning, namely, represents a spreading of the pattern of meaning which is not tied to objectively existing referent, but which consists of the contexts of common uses.

If we consider novelty to be a single criterion for the difference between the literal and the metaphorical we have to answer another serious remark, namely: How do we distinguish metaphor from novel, but meaningless use? To answer this question let us recall Wittgenstein once more and his notion of »family resemblances«²⁰ Although many different uses of a word can not be tied to an objectively existing re-

ferent, nor be subsumed under one common denominator, they are connected by »family resemblance« ties. Our Production and understanding of literal as well as metaphorical meaning is based on the general cognitive presumption, on our ability to perceive similarities. Usage of any literal term presupposes our ability to perceive similarity between the context of actual utterance and contexts of past utterances. Production and understanding of metaphors leans on the same ability. Whether we shall accept a new utterance as literal, as metaphorical, or refute it as meaningless depends on the degree of its similarity to past utterances. The process of acceptance or refutation also embraces other general epistemological rules such as plausibility, verisimilitude, coherence etc. In any case, metaphors do not occur as cases of another type, i.e. similarities that account for their meaning may be seen as more subtle, not immediately present as those which account for the literal meaning, but not of another kind. As Ortony has put it: »All uses of language tend to stretch it; but in literal uses, language bounces back. Metaphors stretch language beyond its elastic limit.«²¹ Or rather, by stretching language beyond its elastic limit metaphors make it more elastic.

We hope that our analysis of metaphorical meaning has proven that the difference between literal and metaphorical is the difference in degree, that no special semantic, pragmatic or extralinguistic knowledge is needed for the production and interpretation of metaphors other than the one that is implicit in any literal use of language. The Semantic innovation produced by metaphors should not be considered as a semantical problem different from any new meaning formation, from the acquisition of a new literal meaning. What has been confusing for the theoreticians of metaphor is the fact that in the case of metaphors semantic innovation is Produced by means of literal terms the meaning of which seemed to be autonomous and fixed. The study of metaphor has proved that the meanings of words should not be regarded as context independent and fixed, that an artificial break between semantics and pragmatic leaves many semantical problems unsolved. The case of metaphor may be regarded as the crucial example for the inconsistency of such an attempt. Metaphor is undoubtedly one of the most important means of the formation of lexical meaning so it may not be regarded as a deviant, marginal case, or what is worse as an unsolved semantical Problem. The fact that the crucial semantical Problem turns out to be unsolvable within the frames of semantics seems to be a sufficient argument for the invalidity of such a semantics. f

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Vanda Božičević: O SEMANTICI METAFORE

Sažetak

Članak raspravlja o problemu metafore sa semantičkog gledišta i to na leksičkoj razini. Objasnivši zašto metafore predstavljaju semantički problem, te dajući kratak pregled postojećih teorijskih rješenja ovog problema, autorica izlaže svoje shvaćanje metafore, bazirano na semantičkoj teoriji kasnog Wittgensteina.

Pod pretpostavkom ukidanja umjetno stvorenog jaza između semantike i pragmatike, autorica tvrdi da proizvodnjom i interpretacijom doslovnog i metaforičkog govora vladaju isti semantički pragmatički i epistemološki principi. Razliku između doslovnog i metaforičkog shvaćanja je kao razlika u stupnju koja ovisi o tome što smatramo uobičajenom upotrebom nekog termina. Metafora je pritom definirana kao semantička inovacija, imenovanje, ostvareno pomoću proširenja doslovnog značenja. Dokaze za svoje tvrdnje autorica nalazi putem analize procesa učenja jezika.