

# Metaphor and Relevance

Yoon-Kyoung Joh

## Abstract

Metaphor is not just a "less-than-literal speech (rough approximation)" or a "loose talk." Metaphor is a highly calculated and sophisticatedly devised mechanism that enriches our communicative life in a pervasive way. What makes us see metaphor as loose and rough is not the nature of metaphor itself but the concepts we try to express by means of metaphor. In terms of Relevance Theory, what is the most relevant is to attribute the minimal properties that allow us to interpret. Metaphor is based on a minimal set of "noteworthy" properties and thus it is one of the most economical and relevant reflections of our mind. In fact, what basically triggers metaphor is our desire to communicate as clearly and concretely as possible. In addition, I claim that most of conventional metaphors are metaconceptual echoic uses addressing a corroborating attitude to what is implicitly attributed.

## 1. Introduction

Grice (1975) deals with metaphor as a case of deliberate violation of quality maxim. According to him, metaphor is characteristically involved with "category falsity." Such apparent falsity or contradiction leads the cooperative hearer to extract an implicature that is logically derived from the original and that keeps the maxim of truthfulness. Let's recall the example discussed in Grice (1975). The utterance (1.a) is a figurative (non-literal) speech in Grice's term that is literally interpreted as the utterance (1.b) because (1.a) reveals untruthfulness in the respect that the subject 'you' belongs to the animate category while 'the cream' compared to is under the inanimate object category.

- (1) a. You are the cream in my life.  
 b. You are my pride and joy.

Grice treats metaphor as a more or less fanciful way of talking, not a truthfully stated one. Even though he asserts that the apparent maxim violation comes from the truth functional incorrectness of category, it should be noted that he also recognizes that the speaker is attributing to his audience some features that resemble the substance or expression he intends to convey. Nevertheless, he conclusively claims that the categories are mismatched.

In the repercussion of Grice's cooperative principle, Relevance Theory<sup>1)</sup> has galvanized the study of what used to be called figurative speech, especially on the topic of irony. In RT, it is refuted that the figurative speech violates the quality maxim primarily attributing to the fundamental fact that human cognitive capacity operates in terms of "resemblance" not identity or accuracy. The theory, therefore, suggests that it would not be reasonable to talk about our utterances in such a dichotomized way as falsity and truth.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1990), irony involves an implicit expression of attitudes to an implicitly attributed thought and thus "fully literal" and echoic while metaphors are "less-than-literal" representations of the speaker's thought. They correctly point out that metaphor is not a figurative speech at all but they still regard it as a kind of "rough approximation." Sperber and Wilson (1990) illustrate the following examples with the explanation that (2.a) is less-than-literal due to the weak implicatures listed in (2.b-2.e).

- (2) a. Their friendship blossomed.  
 b. Their friendship developed naturally.  
 c. Their friendship developed from small beginnings.  
 d. Their friendship grew into something beautiful.  
 e. Their friendship was destined to fade like a flower.

It is true indeed that metaphor mixes what are intuitively distinct sorts of

---

1) Here and throughout, I will use 'RT' to abbreviate Relevance Theory

categories and the comparison is based on similarities, as commonly discussed in Grice (1975) and Sperber and Wilson (1990). However, what I would like to claim mainly in this paper is that metaphor is not just a "less-than-literal (rough approximation)" or a "loose talk" that simply reveals some similarities to what we intend to get across. In terms of RT, metaphor is a highly calculated and sophisticatedly devised mechanism that enriches our communicative life in a pervasive way. What makes us see metaphor as loose and rough is not the nature of metaphor itself but the concepts we try to express by means of metaphor.

Until now, irony has been enthusiastically studied and analyzed in terms of RT, while metaphor couldn't have enough attention of relevance theorists. But I can't find any reason not to treat metaphor in parallel with irony. In fact, I find that metaphor — especially, conventional metaphor — is also a kind of echoic use, addressing a corroborating attitude to what is common-sensically and culturally assumed.

Metaphor is deeply related to culture. Not only are metaphors grounded in our cultural experience but they also influence our viewpoints. In other words, metaphor and our experience correlate each other very profoundly. This fact indeed makes us more difficult to study metaphor than irony. But culture-based and world knowledge-induced language phenomena can be one of the intriguing topics of the pragmatic research.

## 2. What metaphor is

Before discussing the reasons why metaphor is not a loose talk in the third section, I will first identify what metaphor is by distinguishing it from subcategorization and metonymy. Through this process, I will clarify the distinct properties of metaphor.

### 2.1. Metaphor vs. Subcategorization

Metaphor should be distinguished from subcategorization. Apparently, they function similarly but a fundamental difference lies between them: in metaphors, one entity should not be the subset of the other. The following

examples are cases of subcategorization because an argument is basically a kind of conversation and love is a subtype of an emotion. Thus examples in (3) are not metaphoric expressions.

- (3) a. An argument is a conversation.
- b. Love is an emotion.

On the contrary, the examples below are metaphors because an argument and a war are different kinds of activities and an argument is just partially interpreted in terms of a war. The same goes for the second example. Love is not a subset of a journey in our semantic type hierarchy. They describe different processes that only share some properties.

- (4) a. An argument is a war
- b. Love is a journey

## 2.2. Metaphor vs. Metonymy

As Nunberg (1995) claims, metonymy also allows us to use one entity to stand for another just like metaphor. According to him, however, what is distinct about metonymy from metaphor is that the former is concerned with "contiguity," while the latter with "resemblance." The following examples cited from Nunberg (1995) contain metonymy.

- (5) a. *The Times* hasn't arrived at the press conference yet.
- b. *The ham sandwich* is at table 7.

Let's see how one entity stands for another: 'The Times' in (5.a) refers to the journalist working for the Times; and 'the ham sandwich' in (5.b) refers to the person who has ordered the ham sandwich. In metonymy, it is easily found that one is closely and contiguously related to the other. Lakoff (1980) subclassified those kinds in contiguous relations as follows: the part for the whole, producer for product, object used for user, controller for controlled, institution for people responsible, the place for the institution, the place for the event, etc. Another thing particular about metonymy is that metonymic words

are primarily used to refer to something by what is logically related to it. They do not express any abstract ideas or unique relations. They serve only the referential function.

In contrast, metaphor is also a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another like metonymy but its primary function is not a referring but an understanding of a relation or an idea in a rather profound way. For metaphors, we can speak of a relation of resemblance but there is no objective or existential relation between the basic (literal) and the derived (nonliteral) properties unlike the cases of metonymy. Metaphors are, as claimed by Lakoff (1980), grounded on experiential relations. (This point will be discussed in the next section.) The examples below have been illustrated by Nunberg (1995).

- (6) a. *Inflation* has robbed me of my savings.  
 b. I am *cruising down the fast lane of life*.

'Inflation' in (6.a) is metaphorically substantiated. It is a sort of personification. It is one of the distinct characteristics of metaphors. Usually metonymy involves dehumanizing process whereas metaphor prefers personification. The utterance (6.b) contains the metaphor "LIFE IS A WAY." This is used to make the abstract concept of life's fast passing by more palpable by comparing it to the fast lane. Unlike the metonymic cases, life is not contiguously or logically derived from a lane nor is the reverse.

### 2.3. Characteristics of metaphor

Metaphor should contain two different kinds of things or activities. If one characterizes the other in its own definition, it fails to be metaphor. As Lakoff (1980) mentions, the structure of metaphor should be partial. If it were not partial but total, one concept would be substituted by the other. We also distinguish metaphor from metonymy on the ground that metonymic structure is in contiguous relation whereas the metaphorical structuring is based on resemblance. Furthermore, the main function of metonymy is referring while that of metaphor is an understanding of abstract ideas.

### 3. The reasons why metaphor is not a loose talk.

In this section, I will illustrate the reasons why metaphor is not a "less-than-literal" or approximate talk. First, resemblance will be examined in depth and then I will focus on what motivates metaphors by surveying three types of metaphors.

#### 3.1. Resemblance

According to Rosch (1977), people categorize things in terms of prototypes and family resemblance. For example, *pigeons* and *haws* are prototypical members of a bird category whereas *chickens*, *ostriches* and *penguins* are non-prototypical and shading off into peripheral members. Nonetheless, they are tied within the same category since the marginal types also share some of the relevant properties of the prototypes and hence show sufficient family resemblance to the prototypes.

This point of view basically assumes that objects and things do not exist holistically in our mind. They are characterized by a set of properties. Rosch (1977) states, "Categorization is primarily a means of comprehending the world, and as such it must serve that purpose in a sufficiently flexible way." This quotation implies that the application of a fixed concept to a new domain is rather free and depends on our way of comprehending the reality and hence categories are open-ended and vague enough for us to go across the boundaries.

If categories are so flexible and open-ended, it wouldn't be desirable to talk about "category falsity" at any time. Human categories are not perfect in themselves. They are loosely organized with a set of properties. Therefore, Grice's basic idea that metaphor violates quality maxim because categories are mismatched is by no means acceptable.

Sperber and Wilson (1990) have also argued against Grice's maxim-based approach when proposing RT. One of the most arresting factors that has made "optimal relevance" psychologically and empirically more reasonable than Grice's maxim-based approach is that they strike out the fact that the human mind is oriented toward resemblance. They say, "A representation can achieve

its aim without sharing all its properties with the original. It only resembles the original... Verbal communication may also involve the exploitation of linguistic resemblance." They also asserts that the speaker only attributes the minimal set of properties that are needed for the hearer to achieve an intended interpretation. This means that resemblance is, in fact, the most economical and relevant way of communicating.

Their fundamental assumption behind RT is resemblance, as stated above. This is the most brilliant aspect that makes RT reliable and convincing. But they contradict in their own reasoning when claiming that metaphors, based on similarities between two items, are just a rough talk. After all, to be consistent with their assumption, all of our language uses should be characterized as rough approximations. Thus, particularly characterizing metaphor as less-than-literal or loose is not preferable.

Furthermore, One calls up the other directly because the features shared by both are "noteworthy." This noteworthiness makes it possible that those metaphorical expressions mean what they intend to mean. What's more, our experiential knowledge makes metaphors easily understood. There are many systematic metaphors that are derived from our basic cognitive concepts. From an objective point of view, metaphors are to be obviously mismatched in terms of strict categories but from an experiential viewpoint, they are highly validated and based on our cultural categories within our cognitive capacity. By virtue of its experiential basis, metaphor does serve as a useful and effective container for carrying complex and aesthetic concepts. This point will be discussed more in 3.2. as an underlying motivation of metaphor.

### 3.2. Three types of metaphor

I would like to introduce three types of metaphors that are classified by Lakoff (1980): structural metaphor, spatial metaphor, and ontological metaphor. Investigating these types also gives us an obvious evidence that can buttress the main claim of this paper. I will try to focus on why those metaphors are developed and so widely used. First of all, let's look at structural metaphors. This kind of metaphor establishes similarities between the things that are compared, for instance, between an argument and a war;

and between an idea and a plant. According to the basic metaphors (ARGUMENT IS WAR and IDEAS ARE PLANTS), we create a number of metaphors as listed in (7) and (8). The examples are from Lakoff (1980).

ARGUMENT IS<sup>2)</sup> WAR. (4p)

- (7) a. Your claims are *indefensible*.  
 b. He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.  
 c. His criticisms were *right on the target*.  
 d. I *demolished* his argument.  
 e. I've never *won* an argument with him.  
 f. You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*  
 g. If you use that *strategy*, He will wipe you out.  
 h. He *shot down* all of my arguments

IDEAS ARE PLANTS (47p)

- (8) a. His ideas have finally come to *fruition*.  
 b. That idea *died on the vine*.  
 c. That's a *budding* theory.  
 d. It will take years for that idea to *come to full flower*.  
 e. Mathematics has many *branches*.  
 f. The *seeds* of his great ideas were planted in his youth.  
 g. She has *fertile* imagination.  
 h. He has a *barren* mind.

The italicized words in (7) 'indefensible,' 'attack,' 'target,' 'demolish,' 'win,' 'shoot,' 'strategy,' and 'shoot' are normally and should be used to describe a war. But we use them for arguments so commonly. Does it reveal a category falsity? Or is it a rough approximation? Then, why do we use them so commonly? I can't find anything wrong or rough about them. Rather, those metaphoric expressions seem to carry more impact and force with them. Presumably for the reason that we have such a basic metaphor like "ARGUMENT IS WAR" in our mind. They are fit to our experience, the reality

---

2) According to Lakoff, "IS" is a shorthand for some set of experiences on which the metaphor is based.

we know from experiences.

As for the metaphors in (8), we basically have the metaphoric concept "IDEAS ARE PLANTS" and create such metaphors from (8.a) to (8.h) very productively. Therefore, using words for plants such as 'fruition,' 'vine,' 'budding,' 'flower,' 'branch,' 'seed,' 'fertile' and 'barren' to portray ideas is not rough or false. They just correctly reflect our cognition.

Another way of conveying abstract messages is to use spatial schemata. This allows us to grasp ideas more clearly, economically and dynamically. This is the second type of metaphor: spatial (orientational) metaphor. Usually we conceive of happiness, life and health as "up" while sadness, death and sickness as "down." Having these concepts underlyingly, we have many metaphors like the utterances in (9) and (10).

HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN (Lakoff (1980), 15p)

- (9) a. I'm feeling *up*.  
 b. That *boosted* my spirits.  
 c. My spirits *rose*.  
 d. Thinking about her always gives me a *lift*.  
 e. I'm feeling *down*.  
 f. He's really *low* these days.  
 g. My spirits *sank*.

HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN (Lakoff (1980), 15p)

- (10) a. He's at *the peak* of health.  
 b. He's in *top* shape.  
 c. As to his health, he's way *up* there.  
 d. He came *down* with the flu.  
 e. His health is *declining*.  
 f. He *dropped* dead.

The third type of metaphor most clearly shows us the underlying motivation why we devise metaphors. According to Lakoff (1980), ontological metaphor is a way of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc. as entities and substances." That is, we identify our event-type experience as entities or

substances for the purposes of referring to them, categorizing them, and quantifying them. By imposing substantial, even if artificial, boundaries, events turn out to be physically described phenomena that are easier for us to understand.

INFLATION IS AN ENTITY (or AN ANIMATE BEING) (Lakoff (1980), 26p)

- (11) a. *Inflation is lowering* our standard of living.
- b. *Inflation is backing* us into a corner.
- c. Buying land is best way of *dealing with inflation*.
- d. We need to *combat inflation*.

THE MIND IS A MACHINE (Lakoff (1980), 27p)

- (12) a. We're still trying to *grind out* the solution to this equation.
- b. My mind just isn't *operating* today.
- c. Boy, *the wheels are turning* now!
- d. I'm a little *rusty* today.

Both in (11) and (12), the metaphors characterize 'inflation' and 'mind' agents or something physically changeable. This is a very economic and effective way that we conceptualize what is less clearly delineated in terms of what is more clearly describable.

We use metaphors for abstract concepts such as time, emotions, indelible memories, aesthetic pleasure, moral experiences, spiritual practices, etc., that are important to us but difficult to portray clearly. This fact accounts for why our language or communication is full of metaphors. We try to comprehend what cannot be understood easily by means of ontological, structural or spatial metaphors, each on its own merit. If the basic motivation to create metaphors is clarity even at the cost of their processing burden, it isn't reasonable to conclude that they are inherently rough approximations.

#### 4. Metaphor in terms of Relevance Theory

To sum up the previous section very sketchily, all our language uses are

rough approximations. Thus, it would not be reasonable to say that metaphor is rough and less-than-literal in any particular way. It only represents the typical way we communicate. In fact, the most relevant is to attribute the minimal set of properties that allow us to interpret. Even more, metaphor is based on "noteworthy" properties acquired from our experiential knowledge so that it is neither cognitively too complex nor beyond the interpretation. As discussed before, metaphor is experiential reflection of our mind. Furthermore, to refute the claim that metaphor is just a loose talk, I have pointed out what basically triggers and motivates metaphor is our desire to be as clear and concrete as possible. It isn't supposed to be rough in the first place. We use metaphors to be distinctly and lucidly understood.

Nonetheless, creating fresh metaphors requires much more effort than delivering a direct and plain message. In addition, it is involved with more logical complexity resulting in more processing effort. Then, why do we use metaphors so productively and pervasively? In terms of RT, there should be equal amount of cognitive effects to the efforts additionally put into. Noh (2000: 63) puts relevance into the following conditions in (13) and describes the criterion of RT as in (14).

(13) Relevance

- a. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects achieved in an individual by processing some information, the greater the relevance of that information to that individual.
- b. Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort required to achieve those cognitive effects, the greater the relevance of that information to that individual.

(14) Criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance

An utterance, on a given interpretation, is consistent with the principle of relevance if and only if the speaker might rationally have expected it to be optimally relevant to the hearer on that interpretation.

To be relevant, cognitive effects should be as great as possible while

processing efforts should be as little as possible. If there are more efforts, more cognitive effects should offset them. As claimed by Wilson and Sperber (1990), there are an indefinite number of associated implicatures for a single metaphor as briefly noted in (2). Also, what I would like to further assume is that metaphor accompanies more cognitive effects other than implicatures. That is, metaphor is an echoic use. Metaphor conveys metaconceptually echoed ideas. Let's look at the examples illustrated by Lee (2000).

(15) X<sup>3)</sup> IS MONEY

- a. You have to *discount* what he says. He exaggerates all the time.
- b. I don't *buy* that argument even for a second.
- c. They have to make a *wholesale* change.
- d. Most of his passes were *right on the money*.
- e. I am really *banking* on it.
- f. Let me put in my *two cents' worth*.
- g. He has a *wealth* of ideas.

Observing the metaphors in (15), we can find that many metaphors are closely related to money. There is no single consistent image common across all the things listed in (15) since what is viewed as money is different in all the cases above. However, as Lee (2000) argues, coherence in this whole metaphoric concept "X IS MONEY" is found in the consistency of speaker's attitude to money. Money metaphors are all expressing speaker's approving attitude on what is attributed to money. Instead of using metaphors in (15), the speaker could have said (a) 'You have to simplify what he says,' (b) 'I don't accept that argument,' (c) 'They have to make a big change,' (d) 'Most of his passes were accurate,' (e) 'I really depend on it,' (f) 'Let me put in my less important opinion,' and (g) 'He has many ideas.'

Using the money metaphors the speaker metaconceptually echoes what is commonly believed about money in capitalist societies. Then, he can attract more attention of the hearers and convey his implicit message that he is

---

3) Here, the X stands for an expression of entity, action or activity that can be understood as a metaphoric extension of something associated with money

indeed in agreement with the idea that money is important. What he metaphorically enunciates gets more effects by depending on what is commonly and strongly authorized.

Irony and metaphor are common in the respect that both are involved with implicit echoic attribution of an opinion. In other words, irony and metaphor convey implicitly delivered attitudes while metalinguistic negation does so explicitly. But what makes them different is that irony is an expression of an attitude of dissociation from the opinion whereas metaphor is an expression of a corroborating attitude.

When encountering an example like below, however, it is not sure what basic idea is expressed by the metaphor. There are some idiosyncratic metaphors and thus hard to say that all metaphors are echoic uses.

(16) The *volcano* who just slammed the door out was John.

Even in those isolated metaphors, cognitive effects other than associated implicatures can result in. The utterance (16) as well as utterance (1) discussed earlier allows us to get more flavor, immediateness, creativeness and freshness than routine talks by attributing John's furious temper to the properties of the volcano.

## 5. Conclusion

Our communication abounds with metaphors. Many metaphors structure our everyday activities in a very profound way even though they are so familiar to us that we normally don't recognize them.

Metaphors are, indeed, based on similarity, not on identity and thus truth functionally false. But it doesn't make them as a kind of loose talk. They do "highlight some aspects and downplay others" intentionally. Thus, producing and comprehending metaphors require not only imagination but also logical efforts. We have to reason what kinds of metaphorical implicatures can be inferred in terms of RT. Furthermore, we can obtain more cognitive effects than just implicatures: we can arrive at the understanding of the speaker's

approving attitude or at the acquisition of immediateness, fresh or dynamic flavor and creativeness.

Compared to irony, metaphor is associated with indeterminacy to some high extent. Indeterminacy is, however, not the one that we should rule out in our analysis. It is the one we have to bear with because it is so common in our talks. Trying to exclude and hide it results in ignoring the communicative reality. It would be desirable to accept it and try to generalize relevance theory as a more comprehensive principle that straightens indeterminacy in the interpretation of metaphorical utterances. Therefore, in a comprehensive RT, metaphor is not a loose talk, but a highly calculated and effective way of communication.

#### References

- Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 1992. On Verbal Irony. *Lingua* 87.
- Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 1990. Outline of Relevance Theory. *Hermes* 5.
- Geoffrey Nunberg. 1995. Transfers of meaning. *Journal of Semantics* 12.
- Grice. 1975. Logic and Conversation. in Cole & J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*
- Lakoff, 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, C. B. 2000. *Money Metaphor in American English: A Case Study of Language and Culture Interaction*. Handouts of the meeting at the Language Research Institute.
- Noh, E-J, 2000. *Metarepresentation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Rosch. 1977. Human Categorization. In N. Warren, ed., *Advances in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 1. New York: Academic Press.