

Paul Ricoeur's Interactive Metaphor

The function of tension between the metaphorical sense and the original meaning

Belkacem boudenna *1

University Center of El Bayadh – Algeria

blkacem@hotmail.fr

Published: 31/03/ 2025

Accepted: 22/03/2025

Received: 08/02/2025

ABSTRACT:

Paul Ricoeur transformed the fields of hermeneutics, narrative theory, and the philosophy of language by asserting that metaphors are essential to human understanding rather than mere embellishments of language. In his work *The Living Metaphor*, he argues that metaphors actively shape meaning, facilitating deeper interpretations of reality while intertwining with narrative and identity to express human actions and social interactions. Ricoeur frames metaphors as cognitive instruments that create new conceptual frameworks, echoing the views of cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson.

By challenging the conventional view that dismisses metaphors as mere stylistic devices, his interdisciplinary approach integrates philosophy, cognitive science, and literary studies, highlighting the critical role of metaphors in meaning-making.

In this sense, Ricoeur's impact continues to resonate, fueling discussions about the ethical aspects of metaphor and its capacity to shape social realities. This underscores the transformative power of language in human experiences.

This article explores Ricoeur's notion of interactive metaphor, its philosophical implications, and its relevance to our understanding of language, cognition, and interpretation.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, metaphor, interaction theory, multiple meaning, context

1. Introduction

Paul Ricoeur is celebrated for his influential work in hermeneutics and narrative theory, especially in his groundbreaking book **The Living Metaphor**. In this book, Ricoeur examines the dynamic function of metaphors within language, asserting that they act as active agents in shaping human understanding and experience. He contends that metaphors are not simply ornamental aspects of language; rather, they are interactive

constructs that affect thought, communication, and the formation of identity, thereby playing a vital role in how we create meaning in our lives.

Despite the acclaim, Ricoeur's ideas have also sparked debates, particularly regarding the balance between structured interpretations and the fluidity of meaning inherent in metaphors. His engagement with other thinkers, such as George Lakoff, Jacques Derrida, and Friedrich Nietzsche, highlights a productive tension in metaphor studies, inviting ongoing exploration into how metaphors function across different contexts and disciplines.¹

Ricoeur's legacy continues to resonate in contemporary discourse, affirming the centrality of metaphor in understanding human thought and social interaction.

2. Paul Ricoeur's Interactive Metaphor:

Ricoeur's notion of the "living metaphor" emphasizes the tension between contrasting ideas, enabling a creative semantic process that invites individuals to engage in imaginative restructuring. This perspective positions metaphors as emergent phenomena arising from the complexities of social interaction, where meaning evolves through dialogue and cultural context. Ricoeur's framework critiques traditional views that confine metaphor to static representations, thereby enriching the discourse around the interplay of language, interpretation, and human agency.²

The significance of Ricoeur's theories extends beyond philosophy into various disciplines, including literary studies, theology, and cultural theory. His work has sparked critical discussions about the nature of metaphor, particularly its implications for narrative identity and the interpretative processes that govern understanding. Scholars have recognized the impact of *The Living Metaphor* in redefining how metaphors are perceived, challenging readers to consider the "surplus of meaning" that metaphors generate and their capacity to foster empathy and connectivity in communication. "Ricoeur's theory of metaphor is one lengthy contestation of this reduction of the metaphor to denomination. Not only does she blame the death of rhetoric in the 19th century on this reduction of the metaphor to the tyranny of the word, but also our blindness to the symbolic function. The function of the metaphor became twofold³.

3. Analysis of Interactive Metaphors

3.1 Overview of Interactive Metaphors

Paul Ricoeur's exploration of interactive metaphors presents a significant shift in understanding how metaphors function within discourse. Rather than viewing metaphors merely as linguistic ornaments or static expressions, Ricoeur emphasizes their dynamic and interactive nature, highlighting how they actively shape meaning through the interplay of ideas and perspectives within communication. This conception

aligns with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's assertion that metaphors are not only embedded in language but also govern thought and action in subtle, often unnoticed ways.

3.2 The Creative Tension in Metaphors

Ricoeur argues that metaphors create a unique tension between two terms within a statement, which arises from the violation of conventional linguistic codes⁴. This tension serves as the catalyst for creative semantic interpretation, compelling individuals to engage in a process of imaginative restructuring. Through this process, the metaphor transcends its literal meanings, generating new understandings and interpretations that contribute to the construction of meaning in a given context. In this way, metaphors function at the level of the entire sentence rather than being limited to individual words, thus enabling a richer discourse.

Ricoeur's theory of metaphor builds on and extends the interaction theory initially proposed by I.A. Richards and later refined by Max Black⁵. In contrast to the substitution and comparison views, the interaction theory asserts that metaphor arises from the tension between the literal meanings of the terms involved, leading to a productive synthesis of new meaning.⁶

3.3 Metaphor as an Emergent Phenomenon

Ricoeur's perspective posits that metaphors should be viewed as emergent phenomena that arise from the complexities of human dialogue and interaction. He critiques traditional views that place metaphor solely within the cognitive realm of individual minds. Instead, he advocates for an ecological approach, where metaphorical meaning emerges from the interplay of various factors, including cultural contexts, emotional states, and situational affordances. This view suggests that metaphoricity is inherently tied to the dynamic social environments in which it occurs⁷.

3.4 Living Metaphor and Discourse

Ricoeur's concept of 'living metaphor' serves as a focal point for analyzing how metaphors evolve within discourse. He argues that living metaphors embody a tension between what "is" and what "is not," inviting participants in discourse to navigate conflicting interpretations and perspectives. This ongoing negotiation enriches the dialogue and enhances the metaphor's capacity to reflect diverse experiences and viewpoints⁸.

Thus, living metaphors are not static entities but are constantly reshaped through interactions among individuals and their contexts.

3.5 Semantic Innovation and Metaphorical Tension

Ricoeur introduces the idea that metaphor is a site of **semantic innovation**, where two distinct semantic fields collide, generating new meaning" denominative function. He proposes, therefore, a semantic approach to the metaphor based not on the semantics of the word but on the semantics of the sentence. He places the metaphor between the sentence and the word, between predication and denomination⁹." He argues that metaphor is not simply a transfer of meaning but an event in which meaning emerges dynamically through interaction. This process involves:

- **Tension Between Literal and Figurative Meaning** – When two seemingly unrelated concepts are juxtaposed, their literal meanings conflict, creating tension that demands resolution.
- **Fusion of Semantic Fields** – Through interpretation, the audience synthesizes aspects of both concepts, forming a novel insight that neither term alone could express.

For instance, in the metaphor "the city is a jungle," the literal meanings of "city" and "jungle" conflict. However, in the interpretative process, the reader constructs a new meaning, understanding the metaphor as a description of the city's chaotic, competitive, and untamed nature.

3.6 Implications for Understanding Meaning

The implications of Ricoeur's analysis extend beyond mere linguistic examination. By viewing metaphors as integral to the fabric of human discourse, Ricoeur invites a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed and communicated. Metaphors become vehicles for expressing complex ideas, emotions, and cultural narratives, allowing individuals to articulate shared experiences while acknowledging their unique interpretations. This process fosters a sense of connectivity among interlocutors, enhancing mutual understanding and empathy in communication.

3.7 Metaphor as a Mode of Thought

Ricoeur extends his theory beyond linguistic analysis to suggest that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive process. He argues that metaphor is not merely a way of speaking but a way of thinking that shapes human perception and understanding. This insight aligns with later cognitive metaphor theorists like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that metaphors structure human thought itself.

4. Metaphor and Hermeneutics

As a philosopher of hermeneutics, Ricoeur emphasizes the role of interpretation in metaphorical meaning. According to him, the act of understanding a metaphor is not passive reception but an **active engagement** with language. Readers must navigate between literal incongruities and imaginative synthesis, making metaphor a

participatory process. This aligns with his broader hermeneutic project, which sees meaning as arising through interpretation rather than being fixed or predetermined.

The system of associated commonplaces, as attached to words, limits, according to Ricoeur, the work of the metaphorical interaction to already established connotations. Consequently, it is hardly creative of new meaning. In this sense, Ricoeur calls the metaphor, "Man is a wolf " merely trivial¹⁰.

5. Reception and Impact

Paul Ricoeur's exploration of interactive metaphor in "The Living Metaphor" has garnered significant attention in both philosophical and literary circles. Critics and scholars have recognized his work as a pivotal contribution to the understanding of metaphor and its implications for interpretation and meaning-making.

Ricoeur's work is notable for its exploration of the interplay between narrative and identity. He posited that narratives not only recount events but also embody the care and concern of individuals, shaping their self-understanding and identity over time. This concept of narrative identity is central to his philosophical project, emphasizing the significance of storytelling in human life. Ricoeur argued that the narrative unity of a person's life allows for a meaningful articulation of both retrospection and prospection, facilitating an understanding of selfhood as a continuous, evolving narrative.¹¹ ; His book *The Living Metaphor* further illustrates this interaction between language, metaphor, and narrative, asserting that metaphors are not mere ornamental language but active agents in shaping our understanding of reality.

6. Critical Acclaim

Ricoeur's nuanced approach to metaphor, emphasizing its role not merely as a decorative linguistic device but as a fundamental aspect of human understanding, has been widely acclaimed. His assertion that metaphors possess a "surplus of meaning" encourages readers to consider how they shape perceptions of reality, thus broadening the horizons of hermeneutic philosophy

. This perspective aligns with his broader thematic interests in narrative identity and the complexities of human subjectivity, which have resonated deeply within contemporary philosophical discourse.

7. Influence on Literary and Cultural Studies

The impact of Ricoeur's work extends into literary and cultural studies, where scholars have employed his theories to analyze poetic and narrative texts. His engagement with the relationship between language and action has been instrumental in redefining how metaphors are interpreted, particularly within the context of poetic language¹²

The dialogue between Ricoeur and fellow philosopher Jacques Derrida exemplifies the productive tensions in understanding metaphor, where their differing theoretical positions yield complementary insights into the interpretation of texts, especially in poetry

Such interactions have not only enriched literary criticism but have also informed interdisciplinary approaches that combine philosophy with the study of literature.

7.1 Metaphor in Literature and Poetics

Ricoeur's theory has profound implications for literary criticism. Literature, especially poetry, often employs metaphor to create layered and polysemous meanings. Rather than being ornamental, metaphors in literature invite readers to engage with texts in a transformative way, altering their perception and interpretation.

7.2 Contributions to Hermeneutics

Ricoeur's theories of metaphor have also played a crucial role in the development of hermeneutics. His focus on the interpretative processes involved in understanding metaphor allows for a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, challenging traditional views that prioritize authorial intent. This shift toward a more reader-centered interpretation highlights the complexity of meaning in texts and has implications for how scholars' approach both literary and historical texts¹³

Consequently, Ricoeur's work has paved the way for new methodologies in hermeneutics that embrace the richness of metaphorical language.

7.3 Long Lasting Legacy

The legacy of Ricoeur's "The Living Metaphor" continues to inspire contemporary thinkers in various fields, including philosophy, linguistics, and cultural studies. His exploration of how metaphors facilitate a deeper engagement with human experience encourages ongoing inquiry into the role of language in shaping our understanding of the world. The continued relevance of his ideas can be seen in current discussions surrounding narrative theory, identity formation, and the ethics of communication. Scholars recognize that engaging with Ricoeur's insights offers vital perspectives on the interplay between language, thought, and action in the human experience.

8 Comparisons with Other Theorists

8.1 Classical Theories of Metaphor

Before examining Ricoeur's contribution, it is essential to understand the dominant theories of metaphor that he critiques. The two primary classical theories are:

- A. **Substitution Theory** – This perspective, dating back to Aristotle, views metaphor as a rhetorical tool where one word replaces another for artistic or

persuasive effect. For instance, in "Juliet is the sun," the word "sun" substitutes for qualities associated with Juliet, such as warmth and radiance.

- B. Comparison Theory** – This theory suggests that metaphors work by drawing an implicit comparison between two things. For example, "time is a thief" does not mean time literally steals, but rather that time behaves like a thief by taking away moments of life.

Both of these theories treat metaphor as a secondary function of language—an aesthetic or poetic addition rather than a fundamental mode of thought. Ricoeur challenges this view by arguing that metaphor is not simply a decorative linguistic device but a cognitive and interpretive process that reshapes meaning itself.

8.2 Lakoff and Johnson: Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In contrast, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, argue that metaphors are embedded in our conceptual system, influencing not only our language but also our actions and thoughts. They assert that metaphors govern our lives through pervasive, underlying conceptual frameworks, such as "time is money" and "life is a journey." This perspective emphasizes the cognitive aspect of metaphor, where metaphorical concepts shape our understanding of reality.

Ricoeur's interaction with their theory reveals a shared acknowledgment of the significant role metaphors play in cognition, though he extends the conversation to incorporate the hermeneutical implications of metaphor in interpreting human experience.

8.3 Derrida and the Deconstruction of Metaphor

Jacques Derrida's approach to metaphor, particularly through his idea of "différance," critiques the notion of fixed meanings and emphasizes the fluidity and instability inherent in language. He posits that metaphors contribute to this instability, continually shifting meaning through their use in different contexts. While Ricoeur acknowledges the dynamic nature of metaphor, he is more focused on how metaphors can convey stable meanings within specific contexts, particularly in literature and narrative, thereby suggesting a more structured interpretation than Derrida's deconstructive approach¹⁴

9. The Role of Living Metaphor in Ricoeur's Theory

Ricoeur's "living metaphor" serves as a bridge between these various theories, integrating the performative aspects highlighted by Nietzsche, the cognitive frameworks outlined by Lakoff and Johnson, and the fluidity emphasized by Derrida. Ricoeur's perspective on metaphor is not merely about its linguistic function but also about its capacity to create meaning and shape human experiences in a deeply intertextual and hermeneutical manner. He suggests that metaphors can both reflect

and construct reality, inviting readers and interpreters to engage with texts in a way that transcends mere interpretation and fosters a deeper understanding of human existence.

Paul Ricoeur's concept of "living metaphor" plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamic nature of metaphorical language and its implications for human thought and discourse. Ricoeur's exploration of metaphor extends beyond traditional definitions, emphasizing the performative and interactive aspects of metaphorical use in communication and cognition. This section will delve into the core ideas surrounding living metaphor, its theoretical underpinnings, and its implications for discourse analysis. Although ambiguity is a criterion of the literary work as a whole, Beardsley examines it principally at the level of the sentence on the presupposition that the sentence is homogeneous in structure to the literary work as a whole. According to Beardsley, just as a sentence has a sense and reference, so does a literary work. The sense of the work is its verbal design. Its reference is the world of the work, i.e., the projection by means of the work of discourse of a possible, inhabitable world¹⁵

10. Conceptual Foundations of Living Metaphor

Ricoeur's treatment of metaphor is significantly informed by various philosophical traditions, particularly those of Nietzsche, Lakoff and Johnson, and Derrida. These thinkers provide contrasting perspectives on the nature of metaphor, with some viewing it as a speculative tool that shapes our understanding, while others see it as an inherent and always-active aspect of thought and language. Ricoeur identifies a key distinction between these approaches: the former sees metaphor as a prior construct that influences thought, while the latter posits metaphor as an emergent phenomenon that arises from active engagement in discourse¹⁶

10.1 Interplay of Perspectives

Ricoeur's living metaphor is characterized by its ability to highlight tensions between different perspectives within discourse. This approach is informed by the idea that metaphor does not merely exist in isolation but emerges from the interaction of diverse discourses. Ricoeur argues that these "fault lines" in human existence create a rich terrain for exploring meaning and interpretation. The tensions inherent in our attempts to understand and articulate experiences often result in the emergence of new metaphorical insights that challenge and expand our conceptual frameworks¹⁷.

10.2 The Role of Metaphoricity

Metaphoricity, as Ricoeur describes it, is not solely a cognitive or social construct; rather, it embodies a bio-social perspective that emphasizes the interdependence of individuals within a shared ecological context. This notion posits that metaphorical understanding arises from the dynamic interplay between individuals, their environments, and the socio-cultural norms that shape their interactions. By framing

metaphor within this ecological framework, Ricoeur challenges traditional views that locate metaphor primarily within the confines of individual cognition or social discourse¹⁸

10.3 Gradability and Negotiation

A significant aspect of Ricoeur's living metaphor is the idea of metaphoricity as a gradable and interactively negotiated phenomenon. This means that the meanings derived from metaphors can vary based on context, the presence of others, and the specific circumstances of communication. Such a view underscores the importance of recognizing that metaphors are not fixed entities; instead, they are shaped and reshaped through ongoing dialogue and interaction.

10.4 Implications for Discourse Analysis

Ricoeur's insights into living metaphor have profound implications for discourse analysis and our understanding of language. By recognizing metaphor as a living, interactive process, scholars are encouraged to move beyond static interpretations of metaphor and consider how metaphors function in real-life conversations and narratives. This perspective highlights the potential for metaphors to create new meanings and foster understanding across differing viewpoints, as they draw from the rich tapestry of human experience and interaction¹⁹

10.5 Living Metaphor in Practice

In practical terms, the application of living metaphor can be seen in various forms of communication, such as literature, everyday conversation, and political discourse. The ability of metaphor to resonate with listeners and readers reflects its power to evoke shared experiences and emotions, thereby fostering a deeper connection between individuals. Ricoeur's exploration of living metaphor encourages a more nuanced approach to interpreting language, urging analysts to consider the broader ecological and interactive contexts that shape metaphorical meaning²⁰.

11. Conclusion

The significance of Ricoeur's work lies in its demonstration that metaphor functions as more than a decorative element of language - it serves as a fundamental mechanism for meaning creation and world understanding. Through the tension between literal and metaphorical meaning, new semantic possibilities emerge, enabling language to express previously inarticulable insights

Ricoeur's theory particularly illuminates how metaphorical discourse maintains a reference under the suspension of literal reference. This dual movement - suspending direct reference while opening new referential possibilities - allows metaphor to speak about "possible worlds and possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds" ¹.The

enduring influence of Ricoeur's theory stems from its sophisticated integration of linguistic analysis with broader philosophical concerns about meaning, truth, and understanding. His work continues to inform contemporary discussions in linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory, providing valuable tools for analyzing how language shapes our perception and understanding of reality

This framework offers particular value in understanding how metaphorical language contributes to knowledge construction and truth-telling across various domains of human experience, while maintaining careful attention to the tension between literal and figurative meaning that generates semantic innovation.

According to the interactive theory, metaphors are not merely substitutes for literal expressions; they are instrumental in the construction of meaning. Ricoeur highlights the importance of narrative as a means to articulate the complexities of human experience through metaphor. This narrative construction allows for a blending of concepts, leading to emergent meanings that transcend simple denotation. The process of emplotment, or structuring a narrative, enables the depiction of various temporal experiences, where traditional linearity of time can be disrupted to reflect deeper insights about reality

12. References

¹ - Fred Poché ; Metaphor: Knowledge and Truth according to Paul Ricoeur.

Url: https://www.academia.edu/12139725/Metaphor_knowledge_and_truth_according_to_Paul_Ricoeur

² - Joshua Jin Woon Kim ;The hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur - Academia.edu

Url: https://www.academia.edu/8080864/The_hermeneutics_of_Paul_Ricoeur

³ - Thompson, John B. Ricoeur, Paul (1913–2005) - Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Url: <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/ricoeur-paul-1913-2005/v-1/sections/metaphor-and-narrative>

⁴ - Clive Cazeaux ; Living Metaphor , Studi Filosofici 34,2011 ; p 291–308.

⁵ - Max Black ; Metaphor" , in Models and Metaphors , Ithaca , Cornell University Press, 1962 , Chapter Three.

⁶ - John W. Van Den Hengel ; THE HOME OF MEANING The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur ; University Press of America ; 1982 ; p59

⁷ -- Ricoeur and Metaphors

Url: <https://munsonmissions.org/2015/12/09/ricoeur-and-metaphors-2/>

⁸ - Francesco Poggiani ; Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation

Url: <https://reviews.ophen.org/2017/09/24/paul-ricoeur-hermeneutics-and-the-human-sciences-essays-on-language-action-and-interpretation/>

⁹ - John W. Van Den Hengel ; THE HOME OF MEANING;p59.

¹⁰ - Paul Ricoeur ;Metaphore vive ; Collection. « L'Ordre philosophique » ; Seuil, Paris, 1975. p88

¹¹ - Douglas R. McGaughey , Ricoeur's Metaphor and Narrative Theories as a Foundation for a Theory of Symbol,
Religious Studies , Volume 24 , Issue 4 , December 1988 , pp. 415 - 437

¹² - Paul Ricoeur ; *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. R. Czerny, K. McLaughlin and J. Costello, Routledge. London and New York, 2003 ; p164.

¹³ -- Lee Yen-yi, An Inquiry into Paul Ricoeur's *La métaphore vive*: A First Step

Url: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299169985_An_Inquiry_into_Paul_Ricoeur's_La_m_etaphore_vive_A_First_Step

¹⁴ - Lyngdoh, S. (2021) Derrida and the Flesh of Metaphorical Language. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, **11**, 466-481. doi: [10.4236/ojpp.2021.114031](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2021.114031).

¹⁵ - Paul Ricoeur ; *metaphore vive* ; p91.

¹⁶ - Clive Cazeaux ; *Living Metaphor* , *Studi Filosofici* 34,2011 ; p 291–308

¹⁷ - Kim Atkins, Paul Ricoeur (1913—2005)

Url: <https://iep.utm.edu/ricoeur/>

¹⁸ - Clive Cazeaux ; *Living Metaphor* , *Studi Filosofici* 34,2011 ; p 291–308

¹⁹ - op .cit, p291-308

²⁰ - Paul Ricoeur ; *Metaphore vive* ; P315.