

Metaphor: Prominent Views and Critical Assessments

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at shedding light on some theories and views behind meaning transference in metaphor. The main motive behind handling this article is to show the complexity and pervasiveness of this linguistic device. Metaphor obscures its literal meaning while allowing a new understanding to emerge. Also, it can give concrete illustrations of objects. Most readers find abstractions alien to them that they need a concrete statement such as the one the analogy provides. In fact, metaphor is considered as a powerful device whenever one describes a new situation in terms of what has been described before.

INTRODUCTION

In rhetorical theory, there are different figures of speech (Chapman, 1973). The most recognized ones are those related figures that have to do with verbal transference of various types (Halliday, 1985). ‘Metaphor’ is usually used as a general term that includes these kinds of figures (Hatch and Brown, 1995). In the late 1970s, linguists began to realize the significance of figurative language, mainly that of *metaphor* (ibid.). In the present paper, we will attempt to lay the finger on one of the “black holes in the universe of language,” (Fraser, 1979: 184) viz. *metaphor*.

METAPHOR AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The word ‘*metaphor*’ is derived from the Greek verb ‘*metaphora*’: ‘*meta*’ meaning ‘over’, and ‘*phora*’, ‘to carry’ or ‘to transfer’ (Hawkes, 1972). It refers to a particular linguistic process whereby aspects of one item are transferred to another item (Drabble, 1985). *Metaphor* is usually taken to be an all-embracing term including other figures of speech (Hawkes, 1972).

Figurative language is that language which does not mean what it says (ibid.). Whereas, the language which uses words in their normal sense as they appear in the usual practice of language is said to be literal (ibid.). Figurative language and literal language are “two ends of a scale, rather than clear-cut categories” (Leech, 1969: 147).

The different forms of 'transference' are called figures of speech. These figures turn the language away from the literal meaning towards the figurative one (ibid.). There is a common agreement among linguistic theorists that there is more than one figure of speech. Hawkes (1972) considers *simile*, *synecdoche* and *metonymy* as the main versions of *metaphor*. Mooij (1976) maintains that among the most important figures of speech distinguished in traditional rhetoric are *euphemism*, *hyperbole*, *irony*, *metaphor*, *simile*, *metonymy* and *synecdoche*. Hatch and Brown (1995) state that figurative language is described in terms of its categories which are *simile*, *metaphor*, *synecdoche*, *metonymy*, *allusion*, *personification* and so forth. *Metaphor* is subordinated to various linguistic devices; this subordination often varies with the theory.

THEORIES OF METAPHOR

In a step forward, some linguists attempt to examine and study the nature of *metaphor*. They introduce a number of theories. The most known of which are mentioned below. Mooij (1976) divides the theories on *metaphor* into two cuts: the monistic theories and the dualistic ones.

THE MONISTIC THEORIES

Monism maintains that words in metaphorical expressions lose their normal referential ability and may have an alternative reference (Mooij, 1976). They are called 'monistic theories' because they "allow for at most a singular (abnormal and non-literal) reference in the metaphorical word" (ibid: 31). Monistic theories can be classified into the following subclasses: the connotation and the substitution theories.

THE CONNOTATION THEORY OF METAPHOR

This theory attempts to explain the meaning of metaphorical words, relying on parts of their meaning in the literal use (ibid.). Beardsley (1967), a proponent of this theory, claims that the words of language have certain meanings, viz. their designations. In addition to this, these words have marginal meanings (their connotations) (Mooij, 1976). There is a logical conflict of the literal meaning (denotation) and the marginal meaning (connotation) with the latter coming into prominence (Beardsley, 1967). This conflict foregrounds the connotation (ibid.). The word 'sea' is, for instance, given various connotations such as: 'being dangerous', 'being endless in motion' and 'being a barrier'. However, the word 'sea', literally, denotes 'a large body of salt water'. Moreover, Beardsley (1967) introduces a syntactic analysis of *metaphor*. *Metaphor* to him is composed of a subject and a predicate (a modifier). In the metaphorical expression, 'Jane is a slow snail', 'Jane' is the subject and 'a slow snail' is the predicate, that is a unit which says something about the subject. Another proponent of the monistic theory is Reichling (1935) who maintains that there are certain meaning aspects that can be operative in the *metaphor* (Mooij, 1976). He further adds that the context rules out the realization of these aspects (ibid.). For instance, the

word 'monkey' may be metaphorically used to mean 'being funny' in a particular context, but not 'hairy'.

THE SUBSTITUTION THEORY OF METAPHOR

The metaphorical meaning can substitute the literal one (Kleiber, 1999). Besides, the meaning of metaphorical words can be explained on the basis of other characteristics of their literal use (Mooij, 1976). For example, the figurative expression, 'Diana is a rabbit', substitutes the literal expression, 'Diana is a timid girl': 'Diana' and 'the rabbit' share the same quality that of 'timidity'.

THE DUALISTIC THEORIES

These theories are considered as the most conventional ones. They "hold that words, if used metaphorically, keep their normal referential capacity, thus retaining a reference to elements of their literal extension" (ibid: 31). These words may also have another reference, because of their metaphorical function (ibid.). For example, the word 'jackal' (a wild animal) is sometimes used to refer to a particular person who has certain qualities (ibid: 130). Thus, a dual reference in metaphorical words is made possible. Dualistic theories are classified into the following subclasses: the comparison and the interaction theories.

THE COMPARISON THEORY OF METAPHOR

This theory goes back to Aristotle's Rhetoric in which metaphors are regarded as elliptical similes with the terms 'like' and 'as' omitted (Hawkes, 1972). For example, the sentence 'Peter is a tiger' is the collapsed form of the sentence 'Peter is like a tiger'. Two items are compared and the transfer of meaning takes place between them. Analogy is thus the basis of a *metaphor* (Ortony, 1979). In judging the value of a *metaphor* (good or bad), the similarity made between the two compared items ought to be taken into account (Brooks and Warren, 1961).

Throughout history, many rhetoricians and linguists have fostered Aristotle's view. Some of them are Blair (who claims that *metaphor* is an abridged comparison), Hegel (who regards *metaphor* as a brief comparison) and Vendryés (who considers *metaphor* as a comparison in a nutshell, "la métaphore est une comparaison en raccourci") (Mooij, 1976: 29).

The Iconic Signification Theory appears to be a sophisticated developmental form of the traditional comparison theory (Beardsley, 1967). It states that metaphorical words in any sentence describe not only literally one situation, but also figuratively another one (ibid.). The first situation serves as an icon of the second one (Mooij, 1976). The figurative reference comes into prominence through the literal reference of the metaphorical expression. The statement 'Life is a game' leads us to an iconic sign which indicates a *parallelism* between 'life' and 'game' and thus explains the meaning of the *metaphor*.

THE INTERACTION THEORY OF METAPHOR

In a *metaphor*, there are two items, one of which is considered from the point of view of the other (Kleiber, 1999). Burke (1945) states that “*Metaphor* is a device for seeing something *in terms* of something else [...] And to consider A from the point of view of B is, of course, to use B as a perspective upon A” (Burke, 1945, quoted in Mooij, 1976: 72). In other words, *metaphor* tells the reader/listener something about one object considered from the point of view of another object.

Richards (1936) suggests two ideas interacting in a single word (Cuddon, 1992). He introduces the following terms to talk about *metaphor*: the ‘tenor’ (T), the ‘vehicle’ (V) and the ‘ground’ (G) (Levin, 1977). The tenor is the literal meaning or word, which is present in the sentence, and the vehicle is the metaphorical meaning which is not present but constructed, aiming at interpreting the *metaphor* (ibid.). These two elements meet together to reach a point of similarity named the ‘ground’. Using Richards’ (1936) terms to interpret the sentence, ‘Peter is a tiger’, ‘Peter’ will stand as the tenor and ‘tiger’ as the vehicle. The ground is bravery that is shared by Peter and the tiger.

Black (1979) is considered as one of the most known proponents of the interaction theory. He regards *metaphor* as a ‘filter’ which can organise the way of viewing the subject. The metaphorical expression has two different subjects: the primary subject and the secondary one (Black, 1979). A *metaphor* works by projecting upon the primary subject a number of implications comprised in the “implicative complex” that are predicable of the secondary subject (ibid: 28). To clarify Black’s view, let us give this example: ‘This man is a lion’. Through a number of implications and our knowledge of the concept ‘lion’, the secondary subject ‘lion’ transforms certain aspects to the primary subject ‘man’. The resulting meaning can be that ‘this man is brave’. Interaction theories, therefore, suggest the interaction of the literal and the metaphorical meanings (Levinson, 1983).

VIEWS ABOUT METAPHOR

In this section, we are going to deal with Hawkes’ classification of views about *metaphor*. Thus, there appear to be two fundamental views. There is what is called the Classical view which considers *metaphor* as a detachable element from language (Hawkes, 1972). Moreover, there is the Romantic view which claims that this device produces knowledge (Ricoeur, 1978).

THE CLASSICAL VIEW

Metaphor is thought to have a decorative function, detachable from language. It is used to achieve particular stylistic effects (Hawkes, 1972). Aristotle (1410) states:

“[...] strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor

that we can best get hold of something fresh.” (Aristotle, 1410, quoted in Hawkes, 1972: 10)

Among the advocates of this view are Cicero and Geoffrey of Vinsauf who claim that the role of *metaphor* is “cosmetic with respect to ‘ordinary’ language” (ibid: 11). In fact, the Classical view maintains that *metaphor* is imported into language in order to achieve certain aesthetic effects. In a sharp reaction to the Aristotelian thinking, the Romantic view appeared to lay stress on the vital role of *metaphor*.

THE ROMANTIC VIEW

This view considers the metaphorical expression as language itself (Hawkes, 1972). Proponents of the Romantic view reject the Classical notions, focussing on the vital function of *metaphor* (ibid.). Advocates like Plato, Coleridge and Richards argue that *metaphor* creates a “new reality” (ibid: 92).

The Romantic view claims that *metaphor* produces knowledge (Ricouer, 1978). Language is often regarded as a vague phenomenon. This vagueness is due to change of meaning in words, viz. it is the result of *polysemy* which is a characteristic of descriptive linguistics (Palmer, 1981). *Metaphor* moves along the lines of *oxymoron* (enigmatic expression), *diaphora* (interaction), *epiphora* (fusion of meaning, an intuitive passage) and reaches the frontier of linguistics which is ‘seeing as’ (Ricouer, 1978). The final result is a new meaning in language (ibid.).

Metaphor usually makes “a bridge between levels of experience which are not normally considered to be expressible in the same terms” (Chapman, 1973: 81). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain the pervasive nature of *metaphor* as a “cognitive and social *semantic process*” (Hatch and Brown, 1995: 86). In other words, *metaphor* leads to understanding and experiencing one item in terms of another.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to look at some theories behind meaning transference in *metaphor*. In addition, it has shown the complexity and pervasiveness of this linguistic device. *Metaphor*, being a blanket term, refers to different figures of speech.

As a literary device, *metaphor* can construct a new world. The main function of *metaphor* is to give concrete illustrations of objects. Also, *metaphor* can be regarded as a communicative device. It is considered as a powerful tool whenever one describes new situations in terms of what has been described before.

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