

Reflections On Semantico - Pragmatic Aspects Related to Metaphorical Transfer of Meaning

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Abstract:

This study is concerned with investigating some aspects of metaphorical transfer of meaning, being one of the most significant enriching and productive semantic characteristics of language.

One of the most prominent features of the topic under discussion, is its multidimensional link with different linguistic and non – linguistic domains , among which ones related to grammar and grammaticality, others to semantics and contextual

dependence rules , and some related to the factual (real – world) knowledge.

This study gives an idea about the characteristics of literal as opposed to figurative or metaphorical meaning. It also explains and draws distinctions between metaphorical and metonymical transfers of meaning . It sheds light on the semantic- features method for literal meaning analysis .

The paper discusses some theories of metaphor , touching upon different arguments raised by semanticists and pragmaticists concerning the above theories.

Introduction:

The subject of metaphor and its relations to other classical tropes or figures of speech have been the focus of much thought since the time of the classical rhetoricians. It is not only a central phenomenon in poetry and a very vast proportion of ordinary language usage, but also in other realms such as dreams and even the nature of models in scientific thought.

This trope has recently received more and more attention by some eminent pragmaticists in their attempt to establish a pragmatic approach to it.

However, it is worth mentioning that discussing matters related to metaphor is encountered with difficulties due to divergent classifications and terminologies .

The reason for such awkward complications, to a great extent, is the fact that the more one moves away from the definite and concrete towards the imagined and abstract, the more difficult the situation

becomes – an account which is paralleled to the shift from conceptual meaning to connotational or associative meaning ,which provokes embarking on certain semantic modes such as the metaphorical transfer of meaning and perhaps other respective subjects.

Semanticists have devised rules for describing and accounting for the meaning of words, and consequently studying the semantic relationships holding among these words in different contexts.

The rules mentioned above are actually based on the semantic features associated with the conceptual meaning viz, the literal meaning ,of words .

Accounting for the transfer of meaning , including the metaphorical one, on the other hand , may be considered a violation of the rules governing the assignment of semantic features.

Literal

(Conceptual)Meaning:

Literal meaning refers to the original or, more

specifically, the lexicogrammatical meaning of word. Leech (1978 : 10 - 11) uses the term "conceptual" – sometimes called "denotative" or "cognitive" to denote literal meaning.

This type of meaning is regarded by him to be "the central factor in linguistic communication" which is "integral to the essential function of language in a way that other types of meaning are not" (Ibid; see also Yule,1996:115-16) .

The reason for assigning priority to literal meaning is that it has a complex and sophisticated organization of a kind which may be compared with, and cross related to, similar organization on the syntactic and phonological levels of language.

All linguistic patterning underlies two structural principles: contrastiveness and constituent structure . Conceptual meaning is normally organized in terms of contrastive features; for example, the meaning of the word "man" is specified as : + HUMAN, + MALE + ADULT as distinct from

"woman" specified as : + HUMAN, – MALE ,+ADULT.

The principle of constituent structure, on the other hand , is the one " by which larger linguistic units are built up out of smaller units" (Ibid) .

Halliday (1985: 321) prefers to use the term "congruent" for "literal" meaning, stating that the congruence notion does not necessarily mean that congruent realization is better or more frequent than metaphorical representation .However, it has been noted by linguists that metaphorical modes of expressions are more frequent in adult discourse.

The only examples of discourse without metaphor, viz, literal expressions , are in children's speech (Ibid) .

It can be stated that literal expressions are also more frequently used by foreign learners or non – native speakers of a certion language.

The term " non – idiomatic" also is used by some linguists to refer to all the expressions whose meanings are said to be literal as opposed to " idiomatic" ones which refer

to all the expressions whose meanings are said to be figurative or metaphorical (Lyons,1981:145) .

It can be assumed that to any metaphorical expression corresponds another or perhaps more than one literal or congruent expression.

Semantic features:

One way of analyzing meaning is in terms of semantic features which reflect the real components of meaning applicable to the conceptual or literal meaning of words, subsumed under an approach in semantics called componential analysis devised by American anthropologists in the 1950s (Crystal, 1985:62; Yule,1996:115) .

Sentences such as the following are syntactically well structured:

The hamburger ate the man.

The car slept soundly.

Despite their being well-structured, the sentences above are , semantically speaking , odd because the semantic features which characterize the nouns "hamburger" and "car" are different from those which

apply to the verbs "ate" and "slept" respectively, viz, the semantic feature of the first two words is - animate (=does not denote an animate being), while the semantic feature describing the other two words is +animate (=denotes an animate being) .

In other words, there is a lack of feature mapping.

Consider now the following sentences:

The man ate the hamburger.

The child slept soundly.

It is obvious that the sentences above are syntactically as well as semantically correct owing to the availability of feature mapping between "man" and "child" on the one hand , and "ate" and "slept" respectively on the other.

Although useful in giving us the ability to predict what words would make sentences semantically acceptable or odd; nevertheless, componential analysis is not without problems, the reason being that it is not always easy to come up with neat components of meaning particularly so far as abstract nouns are concerned

(Aitchison,1987:89؛

Yule,op.cit:115-16) .

The notion of agreement among the semantic features of the various syntactic components in sentences is usually studied ,in semantics , under the heading of "selection restrictions", viz, co-occurrence restrictions.

The utterances below from(Leech,1978:141)are unacceptable because they violate selection restrictions.

Water is in love with my friend (water is inanimate, not animate)

The girl assembled(girl is singular,not plural)

Happiness is green (Happiness is abstract,not concrete)

The boys drank the cake (cake is solid,not liquid)

The mouse neighed ("Horse" is required,not"mouse")

Selection restrictions have been problematic for linguists because they have resemblance to syntactic restrictions such as "concord" although they require explanation in terms of semantic features such as human, animate ,...etc (Ibid)

It is worth noting ,in this connection, that many

metaphorical uses of language involve a violation of selection restrictions , which yields a clash of semantic features such as - concrete,and +concrete as in: adopted from (Leech,1978:146) .

Time galloped by, or - animate, and + animate as in :

The railways are dying.

Metaphorical

Transfer of Meaning:

Metaphor is usually subsumed under the figures of speech which are recognized by rhetoricians,as part of what they term as rhetorical transference.

The term metaphor is also used to encompass other figures of speech such as metonymy and synecdoche, all of which involve a non literal use of words.

Treated as a distinct term, metaphor can be defined as "a word used for something resembling that which it usually refers to ,for example, "flood... poured in" in:

A flood of protests poured in following the announcement = [a large quantity came in]

...(Halliday, 1985: 319)
"Flood ... poured in" is said to be used with a transferred meaning ,viz,from a concrete to an abstract sense.

Löbner (2002:50)defines a metaphor as:

"concepts, notions,models,pictures from one domain ,the source domain ,are borrowed for the description of things in another domain, the target domain ;for example "doughnut" in the phrase "a doughnut of mud" in which a piece of mud may be seen as like a doughnut being round, soft and sticky.

These features or pictures from the "domain of doughnuts",the source domain,are borrowed for the description of a piece of mud,the target domain,and here lies the metaphorical transfer (Leech,1978:216) .

Löbner (op.cit:49-50)quotes very interesting examples of metaphorical transfer of meaning taken from the opening lines of an article in an American news magazine (Newsweek, 19 October 1998,p.30)

1- They were China's cowboys.

2- The swaggering , fast talking dealmakers threw around grand projects and big figures as if money would never stop flowing.

3- Then the sheriff came to town.

4- Last week Beijing said it was shutting down one of the flashiest investment institutions.

"China's cowboys" in (1) is metaphorically used to denote "dealmakers" who are swaggering, fast talking and throwing things around. The metaphorical transfer of meaning is further developed in (3) through the reference to the "sheriff",a typical ingredient of a West setting ,which is explained metaphorically in (4) referring to the Chinese government as Beijing (the name of the Chinese capital)

The examples above have shown that the word "cowboys" has undergone a metaphorical shift (transfer) from the lexical (literal)meaning , viz, men who herd cattle, to the shifted meaning (metaphorical meaning)viz,persons being : building a new concept in the

target domain by borrowing parts of the concept in the source domain.

It may be important here to draw a distinction between two types of transfer of meaning : metaphorical and metonymical transfer.

Metonymical transfer of meaning:

Metonymy is a type of relationship between words, based on a close connection in everyday experience. In metonymy an entity is referred to by the name of an attribute, or of another entity semantically related to it (Yule,1996:122;Tehrani & Yeganeh,1999:283) .

The close connection can be based on a container - Contents relation (can-juice), a whole-part relation (house - roof) or a representative - symbol relationship (king - crown) . Thus, metonymy is regarded as one of the figures of speech which involve a transfer of meaning.

It is actually our familiarity with the aforementioned relationships that make us understand expressions such as the following:

drinking the whole bottle ;
answering the door : giving
someone a hand , ... etc
(Yule, Ibid) .

Words, in a metonymical transfer of meaning , linked to concepts representing their lexical meanings lend themselves naturally to the meaning shifts that create different readings.

Metonymical transfer of meaning may be vividly explained by the following examples (Löbner,2002:48) .

- 1- The university lies in the eastern part of the town.
- 2- The university has closed down the faculty of agriculture.
- 3- The university starts again on 15 April.

The word "university" in(1) which lexically denotes the campus lends itself to the meaning shifts " university administration" and "the university courses" in (2) and (3) respectively.

It is worth noting that a metonymical transfer of meaning is quite different from a metaphorical one in that in the first we remain within the same domain if we talk metonymically.

The second ,on the other hand , "yields a new concept in the target domain , a concept that is similar to the original concept of the source domain in that it contains certain elements, although not all, of the source concept (Ibid : 50) .

Theories of Metaphor:

Traditionally, metaphor is viewed as a central semantic process and not a pragmatic one at all.

The most distinguished semantic theories of metaphor, as stated in (Levinson,1983:148)are:

- 1- The comparsion theory :in which metaphors are viewed as similes with suppressed or deleted predications of similarity .
- 2- The interaction theory : in which metaphors are special uses of linguistic expressions where one metaphorical expression is embedded in another literal expression, such that the meaning of the metaphorical expression interacts with and changes the meaning of the literal expression, and vice

versa. (see also Löbner (2002, 50) mentioned earlier under metaphorical transfer of meaning in this study) .

It is believed by some linguists (Wilks,1975;Carling & Moore , 1982) among others cited in (Levinson,1983:150) that standard processes of semantic interpretation including metaphorical transfer of meaning may be ascribed mainly to the elasticity that natural language semantics has, which allows such interaction of senses of words to take place.

However, Levinson (Ibid : 156) perhaps among other prag-maticists, seems dissatisfied with and even critical of the totally semantic – centered interpretation of metaphor.

In addition to criticizing the feature mapping process as being too limited and too determinate to capture the metaphorical force of the expressions , he believes that it is actually the factual (real - world) attributes of the referents of the metaphorical focus rather than the semantic features that

determine the meaning of that force .

A central part of the above mentioned force involves what (Levinson, Ibid) calls "the connotational penumbra" of the expressions involved, and knowledge of the factual properties of referents, and as a consequence, knowledge of the world in general. Accordingly, pragmatics seems to be involved strongly in the interpretation of semantic transfer of meaning in general and metaphorical transfer in particular.

It is supposed in the present study that any meticulous investigation of issues related to meaning transference has to incorporate pragmatic approaches because matters of meaning study can hardly be separated from factual knowledge of the world.

Although Levinson (Ibid,150-61) argues against a completely semantic theory to account for metaphorical transfer of meaning, he simultaneously does not present a clear - cut pragmatic substitute theory. Rather, he argues

that "semantics just provides a characterization of the literal meaning or conventional content of the expressions involved, and from this, together with details of the context, pragmatics will have to provide the metaphorical interpretation" In his attempt to provide a pragmatic account of metaphor, he also points out the need for a considerable help from a psychological theory of analogical reasoning (including artificial intelligence theories of pattern matching and extraction) .

Semantic Concepts Comprehended Via Metaphorical Transfer of Meaning:

Various concepts both in speech and written language are understood metaphorically.

Many of the most basic concepts in the conceptual systems are also comprehended by means of metaphor- concepts like time , quantity, change, action and even the concept of a category.

Since these concepts are normally regarded as part of the grammars of languages, then metaphor can, as a consequence, be considered central to grammar.

The concept of quantities involves some interesting examples of metaphorical transfer of meaning . One of these cases is related to the "More is up, Less is down" metaphor as shown in expressions like⁽¹⁾ .

Prices rose .

Stocks skyrocketed.

The market plummeted.

Another case is related to the metaphor :Linear Scales Are Paths,as can be seen in expressions like :

John is far more courageous than Tom.

John's courage goes way beyond Tom's. John, in other words, is way ahead of Tom in courage.

The metaphor maps the starting point of the path onto the bottom of the scale and maps distance travelled onto quantity in general.

An expression like: "ahead of" is from the spatial domain, not the linear scale domain: "ahead", in its core sense, can be defined with respect to one's head - it is

the direction in which one is facing.

It has often been noted that time in English is conceptualized in terms of space, and understood in terms of things (entities and locations) and motion.

Times are metaphorically treated as things; the passing of time is motion ; future times are in front of the observer ; past times are behind the observer.

Examples:

The time for action has arrived .

The holidays are coming up on us.

Time is flying by.

I'm looking ahead to the festivals.

I can't face the future.

In Quirk,et al (1972:315-16).,many place prepositions which have metaphorical or abstract meanings are mentioned. Prepositions so used very often keep their groupings that they have when used in literal reference to place. The preposition "in" is used metaphorically in:

1-in deep water (=in trouble)

.

2-in difficulties .

3- In a spot (=in a difficult situation) .

Other place prepositions so used are like:above/below,

To be above/below someone on a list under

He has many employees working under him.

Over

They are over the worst.

Beneath

Such behaviour is beneath him (Ibid) .

Conclusion :

Metaphor represents an essential element in natural language as well as in people's social life, indicating a mutual link between the concrete and the abstract concepts. As has been stated earlier in this study, this subject is characterized by its being multidimensional : a network of relationships both within and outside linguistics are involved in it.

Linguistically and syntactically speaking, single words, phrases, sentences and even more extended texts can function as metaphors.

As far as sentences are concerned ,and due to their significance in language,

three types can be recognized : (Levinson, 1983: 48-49) .

1- nominal metaphors as in : This child is an angel.

2- Predicative metaphors as in :

The dog flew across the back yard.

3- Sentential metaphors as in :

a, How did you find him?

B, The lion roared (metaphorical)

within the domain of linguistics also , it is believed in this study that neither semantics alone nor pragmatics alone, can provide a comprehensive and logically acceptable theory for the interpretation of metaphor.

Both fields together actually collaborate for this purpose .It is worth noting in this respect that pragmatics , being concerned with the rules governing language use, is involved strongly in any meticulous exploration of metaphorical transfer of meaning.

Metaphor can also be viewed as part of a common culture shared by the members of a given society.In this connection,

reference has to be made to the significance of psychological and cognitive aspects necessary for understanding metaphors.

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¹ -R.Lakoff, on conceptual metaphor. In www.ac.wvu.edu/~market/semiotic/met4.html .