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Metaphor, Language, and Invention

Abstract. This paper, principally consulting classical and other primary sources ranging from the Greek masters to recent writers, applies commentaries about metaphor to a linguistic, semiotic, and discursive treatment of the phenomena surrounding metaphor and analogy, and makes comments about the cognitive operations associated with producing and interpreting figurative language. These observations are applicable to the spheres of language development, general education, composition pedagogy, and rhetoric.

"Language is the foundation of the whole power of eloquence."

Hugh Blair, 1783

Introcution

From the earliest times, orators were concerned with the art and the science of language use. Gorgias, in the sixth century, BCE, is said to have "transferred poetic expression to civic discourse because he did not think it right for the orator to be like private citizens" (Sprague 1972 40). Since then, writers about language and Rhetoric, whether they, like Aristotle, view Rhetoric as comprising also Invention and the development of persuasion, or like Ramus, view Rhetoric as purely stylistic and ornamental, have recognized the importance of figurative language.

Augustine, in the fifth century, A.C.E.,, stressed the use of ornament in pleasing and persuading his audiences (IV: 41, 42). Erasmus, in the fourteenth century, recognized that "Richness of expression" involves figurative language of various kinds (I: §7). Hugh Blair (1783) held that figures of speech "imply some departure from simplicity of expression ... designed to render the impression more vivid" (273). Aristotle (*Poetics*) wrote that "rare words ... dignify" the diction. Central to Aristotle's concept was the "unfamiliar word", one "outside the common usage" (85). The core category of "strange terms" for Aristotle is metaphor, which he defines thus: "Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy" (*Poetics*, 81). Aristotle provides as examples, "Here stands my ship," in which can be seen a metaphorical rendering of "stands" (species to species); and, "Indeed ten

thousand noble things Odysseus did," in which "Ten thousand ... a species of many, is here used instead of the word 'many'" (ibid.). Thus metaphor has long constituted a prominent topic in the use of language.

The "whole tribe" of metaphor has been further analyzed and subcategorized by thinkers and linguists. Blair notes that "An allegory may be regarded as a continuing Metaphor..." (315). Aristotle sees analogy as a method of metaphor, which he explains, "when B is to A as D is to C, then instead of B the poet will say D, and B instead of D." As examples he offers, "old age is to life as evening is to day; so he will call the evening 'day's old age'" (81). Contemporary linguist Raimo Anttila explains this process, "Analogy is a resemblance between the relationships of things, rather than between the things themselves (a relationship of similarity)" (1989, 105). The category of metaphor seems to capture such relationships in language, and occupies a central position in cognition. Metaphor functions in language; therefore, borrowing the topic from Aristotle, what is true of the whole of language is true of the part.

Linguistic Analysis and Metaphor

Ferdinand de Saussure (1906) assigns language "first place among the facts of speech" (9), recognizing language as the process by which sounds and concepts are transmitted from speaker to auditor as a communicative "circuit" (12). Mounin (1985) emphasizes the communicative import of language, “language is a means; and communication is an end; language exists only to send us back ... to what it is not, that is, to non-linguistic reality” (9). Blair, too, understood that "language ... signifies the expression of our ideas..." (98). Blair made a further, vital, observation, "the connexion between words and ideas may ... be considered as arbitrary and conventional..." (ibid.). It was de Saussure who pointed out about this "convention" (10) that it "never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon" (77).

Indeed, human beings, to use language as a means of communication, must share an understanding or a knowledge of its components—its sounds, its words, its structures. Thus, de Saussure says that "language is looked upon ... as a product of the collective mind of linguistic groups" (5). Language works because its elements are conventional.

Linguistic signs, which, as Blair has said, "signify the expression of our ideas," are composed of "articulate sounds" (98). de Saussure first proposed the bipartite nature of the linguistic sign, "which unites ... a concept and sound-image" (66). The sign comprises the "*signified [signific]* and *signifier [significant]*" (67). de Saussure constructs an analogy for this relation, comparing "language with a sheet of paper; thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back..." (113). It is important to recognize the distinction between the relation of sound image and thought, and that of sound image and object. The table at which I sit is a specific table, and I recognize it by its sign, the English word *table*. However that word does not refer specifically to this table or to any table, but calls out, in my mind or in any native speaker, any object, of whatever size, description, or composition, which is encompassed within the lexical field of 'table'. This *idea* of 'table', to which the sign "sends" me, is de Saussure's *signified*, and the sound-image, *table*, its *signifier*. The *signifier* exists in relation to my conception of the table. Such linguistic signs, understood as "conventional and arbitrary," by Blair, and later by de Saussure, "are acquired through social learning of a code" (Mounin, 154). It is primarily through receptive and productive use of this conventional code that meaning is exchanged and communication occurs.

Life of metaphor

A metaphor begins its life outside of its role as a conventional linguistic sign and passes through phases. Metaphors arise from using "strange terms" and "rare words," words "outside

the common usage," through analogy and allegory. Anttila holds that "metaphors are relational ... they concentrate on similarity of function" (17-18); they are "based on a functional resemblance between two objects" (104). Aristotle's example, "Here stands my ship," reflects the "functional resemblance" of a person standing on their feet to a ship standing at anchor. This understanding of metaphor is evident also in such constructions as Cicero's representation of the Greek and Roman courses of Rhetoric, "streams of learning flowing from the common watershed of wisdom..." (III: xvi 247). Blair points out the importance of analogy in vocabulary expansion, as words are adapted by "some resemblance or analogy" (280). Pyles and Algeo explain metaphor as "a transfer of meaning" from one set of referents to another (1994 242). In this way, contemporary linguists account for metaphor as a process that affects and changes the meaning of linguistic signs.

Perhaps more important for practitioners of Rhetoric is the manner in which figures, used in "departure from simplicity of expression," succeed in rendering the "impression more strong and vivid." Peirce defines a sign as "an object which is in relation to its object on the one hand and to an interpretant on the other in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation with the object corresponding to its own relation to the object" (Hardwick, 1977 32). Peirce defines object as "anything that comes before thought or the mind in any usual sense" (69). He further introduces a tripartite conception involving an object of sensation, an interpretant (in which the sensation resides), and the sign itself. He recognizes different orders of signs. The one he calls an '*indice*' is defined as "a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it" (33). In this way, footprints in snow "mean" someone has passed by (a foot, one reasons, produced the print); a weathervane pointing in a given direction "means" the wind is blowing in that direction. These examples also demonstrate the nature of what Peirce calls the

'Final Interpretant', "the effect the sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect" (110). This result is not the conventional meaning of a linguistic sign, but the understanding reached by an interpreting observer.

Mounin develops this theme further, "*indices* are at the same time materially part of the phenomenon and abstracted from it into a conceptual scheme" (Tihanhi, 1985 xvii). Thus, Mounin says, "we do not decode *indices*, we do not read them like a message, we interpret them..." (154). This conception requires a working out of the *indice* on the part of the auditor or receiver, during which process meaning is induced. This process, according to George Campbell (1776), is "the natural progress of the mind, in the acquisition of its ideas, being from the particular things to the general" (754). It is this conscious working out, this "interpreting" of *indices* that renders more vivid impressions formed in the apprehending consciousness.

Communication presupposes, Mounin says, "intercomprehension ... [and] an intention of communication" (54). A relation exists, Peirce says, "between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought..." (31). When a metaphor is born, it resides outside the conventional system of signs shared within a speech community. Communication occurs as auditors, to attain "intercomprehension," work out indices by interpreting them, in the presence of a perceived "intention of communication." Thus, the interpretant, as Peirce put it, is brought "into a relation with the object..." In this sense a metaphor begins its life as an *indice*. As it is being interpreted, an auditor "works out its full effect" and is brought "into a relation with the object..." Through these processes of invention and working out, 'indices' are cognized, and metaphors come into being.

The next step in the life of a metaphor is that it becomes conventional. Tihanyi points out, "It is in the realm of art that an indice can become conventionalized into a sign" (xvii). A

grammatical parallel is illustrated by linguist Peter Cole (1977). Cole demonstrates that the construction, "*Let's...*" has become lexicalized in English to signify a suggestion. Historically, "*Let's...*" sentences have grammaticalized the cohortative mood. Cole points out that for many speakers of English, "*Let's us go to the show tonight* is grammatical" (277). That the form "*Let's...*" is used with *us* demonstrates that the first-person plural component (of *let's*) has become opaque, and thus the form has become lexicalized as a kind of suggestion-marking device. Cole contrasts this situation with modern Hebrew, in which parallels to "*Let's...*" have not undergone such lexicalization (278, f).

Cole points out that the "process of lexicalization" involves several stages. First, a usage is associated with a "literal" meaning. Next, a "meaning different from the literal meaning" becomes associated with it. In the final stage, a newly lexicalized conventional meaning persists, which we see in such phrases as *Good-bye* < *God be with you*, in which the historical associations are opaque (273-6). Campbell (1776) explains the result of this process, "words which appear tropical to a learner ... may, through the imperceptible influence of use, have totally lost that appearance to the natives who consider them purely as proper terms" (748 n.2). During the fourteenth century in Europe the Black Death killed an estimated one quarter of the population. It is easy to see that one carefully avoided exposure to the plague. The plague surely served as a powerful, evocative metaphor, associating a detested object with the destruction and the abundance of tragedy that it caused. By the twentieth century, however, the figure had become lexicalized to the point that it is now devoid of signifying and evoking power--a figure regarded as cliché. Such is the fate of any metaphor that becomes conventionalized to the point that its evocative, associative power is lost among members of its community of speakers.

Metaphor, language, and thought

The author of *Ad Herennium*, in the Latin tradition, seems more concerned with the communicative face of the metaphor, describing metaphor as usage in which a word applying to one thing is "transferred to another" because of a "similarity", so that it "creates a vivid mental picture" (XXXIV). *Ad Herennium* divides "Figures of Thought" from "Figures of Diction" (XXXI). Blair, though, has a quite different opinion about this imputed distinction. "Figures of Words," Blair writes, are "not meant literally, but ... on account of some resemblance or analogy which they are supposed to bear to ... conditions in life." He argues, "Figures of Thought suppose the words to be used in their proper and literal meaning, and the figures to consist in the turn of thought ... This distinction, however is of no great use ... it is of little importance" (I 275). The province of language cannot be divorced from the realm of thought.

Cicero wrote that "wise thinking" and elegant speaking are "closely related together" (III xvi). This seems to follow from his statement, "Excellence in speaking requires that the speaker really understand the matter he speaks about " (I xi). For Cicero the process of cognition and eloquent speaking cannot be separated. Aristotle includes among the methods of persuasion 'Complete Proofs', 'Probabilities', and 'Signs'. He uses 'Signs' in a general sense, as things which "bear a relation" (I). Since Aristotle defines Rhetoric as "the faculty of **observing ... the means of persuasion," the apprehension and production of signs is to be seen as a cognitive faculty.

Both the construction and the understanding of metaphors "derive from perception of similarity" (Silverman 87). The innovator of a metaphor applies the perceived similarity between one object of contemplation and another familiar object to it. Cicero, in forming his metaphor about the "two streams of learning" (itself a now-lexicalized metaphor) flowing from the Greeks, cognized his object, philosophical and rhetorical thought, according to its similarity to the natural phenomenon of a divided watercourse. Likewise Plato, denouncing the practice of

rhetoric in *The Gorgias*, perceived an analogy between the relation of Rhetoric and politics to the counterfeit relation personal adornment and gymnastics, and in *The Phaedrus* depicts the soul as a tripartite entity, a charioteer driving two horses, one white and one black. Metaphor facilitates communication because auditors apprehend the "similarity of function" of the conventional referent of the sign used and the subject matter to which it is applied.

The cognizing subject engages in the process of "metaphorical expression, borrowed from some resemblance which fancy forms between sensible objects and the internal operations of the mind" (Blair, I 296). Thus the observing subject engages in a process that is cognitive as it is expressive. Furthermore, Campbell points out, "The observation of one analogy naturally suggests another" (754). The process of metaphor mediates between the object of observation and the observer's communication about it.

Thus what begins as a process of cognition extends to a process of communication. Blair sees a link between "that curious analogy which prevails in the construction of almost all Languages, and that deep and subtile logic on which they are founded" (I 100). Anttila writes, "Analogy is a type of reasoning," which is essential even in "scientific thought" (105). Blair adds that "this usage [metaphor] takes place ... from an allusion we choose to make ... in order to convey our ideas" (I 282), and points out: "An image that presents so much congruity between a moral and a sensible idea, serves like an argument from analogy..." (I 288). The language user in this process constructs an allusion because of "some resemblance or analogy" and uses it to impress ideas upon an apprehending mind.

de Saussure taught that the "two elements" of the sign, the *signified* and *signific*, "are intimately united, and each recalls the other" (66). He recognized that "both parts of the sign are psychological" (15). Just as the *signified* (concept) called forth by a sign is a property of our

minds, so is the *signific* (sound image) (see *Course* Part One for complete discussion). de Saussure was the first to recognize that "Everything in language is basically psychological" (66). It is a consequence of this fact that "thinking does not precede language" (Mounin 5). de Saussure says, "Psychologically, our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass..." (111), and "without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula..." (112, which "has to become ordered" (ibid.). Blair likewise points out, "By putting our sentiments into words, we always conceive them more distinctly" (I 7). Thus we see in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph, after a series of disastrous setbacks, finds himself "lost" in a "maze of thoughts," as he lacks the words to organize his thinking.

It is through language that we organize experience and manipulate our sense of reality. Aristotle himself did not see a distinction between language and thought, "Under the head of Thought comes all the effects to be produced by language" (*Poetics* 73). It is true that through language we communicate our thought; it is also the case that through language and its use we clarify our thought and organize it.

Aristotle says "we ... have a natural instinct for representation" (*Poetics* 15), which he attributes to the "enjoyment people always get from representation" (13); "Learning things," he says, "gives great pleasure, not only to philosophers, but also to all other men. The reason ... is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each [object] is..." (15). Pioneer semanticist Victoria Lady Welby (1911) writes, "Man has from the outset been organizing his experience and he is bound correspondingly to organize the expression of that experience..." (*The Enc. Brit.*) Peirce adds, "The mind is characterized by its active power to establish relations between objects..." (69). The discovery and use of "Figures" are vital to this process.

Blair describes "Figures ... to be that Language which is prompted by the imagination or by the passions" (I 275). "Figures," he says, let us "see one thing in another" (287). This process is particularly valuable with respect to "abstract conceptions"; figures "surround it with such circumstances, as enable the mind to lay hold of it steadily, and to contemplate it fully" (ibid.). This process of figuration contributes to Invention as much as to instruction or persuasion. Furthermore, "every idea or object carries in its train some other ideas, which may be considered its accessories. These accessories often strike the imagination more than the principle idea itself" (281). This process, for Aristotle and for Peirce as well, is as epistemic as it is communicative: "The task of philosophy, as Peirce saw it, was to render vague ideas of common experience more precise" (Hardwick xxvi). And the philosopher, as we have seen, utilizes metaphor to do so. For, Peirce argues, "the highest grade of reality is only reached by signs" (23).

This dual nature, the inventive and the communicative, of the role of signs is expressed in Peirce's classic definition, "A sign...addresses somebody, that is, narrates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign" (II 135). As de Saussure also showed, Peirce sees the sign as making an impression in the consciousness of the observer, as a "psychological fact." Furthermore, "the interpretant can become a sign which produces a new interpretant" (Silverman 15). This explains how, as Aristotle wrote, "Life 'presents' to the artist the phenomena of sense, which the artist 're-presents' in his own medium, giving coherence, designing a pattern" (*Poetics* 4). As the Psalmist sang, "I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp." As "we look ... learn and infer" we form an interpretant, be it metaphor or analogy, which we may then present to an auditor.

This interpretant, then, recurs as a sign presented to others to instruct or persuade them. In the life of the sign, the 'I' and 'you' roles are "endlessly reversible" (Silverman, 44). Aristotle shows that "to invent ... parallels" and "fables" and to "frame illustrative parallels" requires "the power of thinking out your analogy" (Rhetoric II). Having performed this Invention, the rhetor further invents "Examples ... [which] give the argument an inductive Air, as "Example...has the nature of induction, which is the foundation of reasoning" (ibid.) Blair saw in allegory, "a favorite method of delivering instruction in ancient times..."; thus, for Blair, "Fables or Parables" were methods of teaching by metaphor (317). Aristotle (*Rhetoric*) shows that "argument by example" and the "illustrative parallel" are analogical processes (II, 181-2). Augustine, too, even in such a specific rhetorical sphere as preaching the Gospel, saw the importance of "the means of discovering what the thought may be, and the means of expressing what the thought is" (IV 1). Thus Isocrates may say, "with this faculty [discourse] we both contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown..." (*Antidosis*). Metaphor stands as a primary process of apprehending an object of contemplation and inventing matter to communicate. Metaphor stands like *Janus* at the portals of Invention and communication, through which on the one hand reality and experience are organized as conception and expression, and on the other conveyed to an interpreting hearer.

Conclusion

A speaker is also a thinker and an observer, in whom the faculty of imagination operates. Metaphor works as a sign because it "mediates between the *interpretant* and its object" (Peirce 31). A speaker apprehends and uses metaphors as signs, "something by knowing which we know something more" (31-2), in organizing and clarifying experience, as Cicero does so elegantly in his "two streams of learning, and in conceiving ideas distinctly, as Plato does to such persuasive

effect with his conception of the soul. When speakers employ, metaphor exemplification, and analogy, and hearers or readers interpret them, they sketch the inductive threads of Invention that bind the elements of speech and exceed the margins of “common usage” and reach the frontier where the "uncharted nebula" of thought is conceived, surveyed, and ordered. Metaphor occurs, in Invention and in language, precisely because, as Peirce writes, "Expression and thought are one" (10).

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