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1

A Discourse-Centred Perspective on Metaphorical Meaning and Understanding

Jörg Zinken and Andreas Musolff

Introduction

In the current climate, it is taken for granted that metaphor is important and ubiquitous in language. Metaphor is no longer discussed as a ‘violation’ of normal verbal meaning (e.g., Levin, 1977), but rather as one form of normal verbal meaning. But of course if metaphor were all that ‘normal’, it would not stimulate the interest that it does. This interest is not only academic: it is not only philosophers, linguists, and psychologists who show a considerable interest in metaphor: ‘real’ people going about their everyday business of discussing events, possibilities, and problems, seem to find metaphors striking as well. As the chapters in this book illustrate, entire discourses circle around the negotiation of a metaphorical understanding. Metaphors in discourse summarize a possible stance, and such summary attracts further debate.

Discourse studies make an empirical contribution to the study of metaphor: depending on the setting that is under investigation, such studies contribute to our understanding of the social realities constructed in the areas of politics, economics, science, law, doctor–patient conversation, and other areas of life. Such research can be conceptualized as an ‘applied’ endeavour that supplements (tests, provides a basis for) the aims of ‘basic’ (linguistic, philosophical) research to understand ‘metaphor understanding’. However, we argue in this chapter that a discourse perspective also calls into question assumptions made on the basis of theoretical commitments. We want to bring both of these possible contributions – of empirical analysis and distinctive theoretical perspective – together in this introduction.

Many philosophical accounts of how metaphor is understood stress the importance of context (e.g., Guttenplan, 2006; Leezenberg, 2001; Stern, 2000). Still, theorizing about metaphor does not often make use of empirical research in which metaphor is studied in context. One of the aims of this book, and this chapter, is to show that it should: approaching metaphors as actions that are embedded in larger discursive activities has important implications for our understanding of ‘metaphor understanding’.

1 Findings from discourse analytic studies of metaphor

Let us start with an example. One of the persistent debates in the study of metaphorical communication concerns the question of how general the information is that is predicated of the topic. Relevance-theoretic approaches (Carston, 2002) answer that it is rather general. Say that the sentence *my job is a jail* were ever used outside the activity of writing a scientific text about metaphor. Let’s further assume that the speaker is not actually manager of a jail, but works in a fish and chip shop, the addressee knows this, and the speaker knows that the addressee knows this. What will the addressee make of the fact that the speaker said that his job was a jail? According to Carston, the addressee ‘works out’ the speaker’s communicative intentions by (a) constructing a new category ‘labelled’ *jail*, which includes not so much actual jails, but rather what is common to all unpleasant, confining situations, and (b) including the speaker’s job in this new, ad-hoc category. The ad-hoc category keeps what is common to jails and the speaker’s job, but loses anything that is true of jails, but not true of the speaker’s job. In other words, the word *jail* becomes merely a placeholder for a quite abstract conceptual category – unpleasant, confining situations – which the hearer supposedly works out when understanding the metaphor. Presumably, the speaker might just as well have said that his job was a stuck lift/elevator – another unpleasant, confining situation to be in.

Another approach to metaphor which claims that the ideas involved in metaphor understanding are very general is ‘conceptual metaphor theory’ (Lakoff, 1993). On this view, the fact that polysemies can be sorted into thematic clusters indicates that these very polysemies are ‘licensed’ by associations holding between general ‘conceptual domains’ – i.e., by ‘conceptual metaphors’.¹ According to this approach, thinking about a relationship as a *car that is spinning its wheels*, as a *derailed train*, or as a *wrecked ship* is the same thing – only the ‘general’ ideas of vehicles,

motion, and impediment to motion, somehow detached from the 'particulars' of a specific vehicle, matter.

However, results of discourse analyses of metaphor do not support the assumption that the forms used in discourse are themselves irrelevant. For example, in one study of public discourse on political transformation, *kettle*-metaphors were used in the context of political pressures, whereas *pot*-metaphors were used in the context of subdivisions of political territory; *ship*-metaphors were used in the context of complex systems, whereas *boat*-metaphors were used in the context of collaboration, etc. (Zinken, 2007). Such results cast doubt on the validity of accounts which assume that metaphorical understanding involves only generic-level, abstract knowledge, representations abstracted from the particulars of situations. If *ships* are metaphorically meaningful in a different way than *boats*, then the particular 'things' that are employed in metaphorical communication (ships, jails, etc.) should surely play a role in accounts of how people make sense of metaphor?

There are two ways to act upon such doubts thrown up by research on naturally occurring communication. One can embrace a distinction between 'mere surface' phenomena, such as the particular words people use in communication, and the 'real business' of 'underlying' structures, the 'hidden' realm of people's representations and abilities that 'allow' them to do or refrain from doing certain things. This Platonic 'solution' is popular with theorists in the 'conceptual metaphor' approach, as it means that they do not need to take discourse data too seriously. It is, unsurprisingly, unpopular with discourse analysts, for the same reason. The second way of acting upon this doubt is to take discourse data seriously. Let us spell out some of the consequences that follow for our thinking about metaphorical understanding.

2 What follows from taking discourse data seriously?

The psycholinguistic literature on metaphor understanding has been focussed on how quickly participants can indicate an understanding of the metaphorical utterance. Metaphor understanding has occurred when the participant gives the relevant feedback, and that is the end of it (e.g., McGlone and Manfredi, 2001). From a discourse analysis perspective, metaphor understanding is not the end, but rather the beginning; entire fiercely fought debates centre on what follows from metaphor understanding: What would or should it mean for Britain to be 'at the heart of Europe' (Musolff, 2004)? Is language an 'instinct' (Pinker, 1994; Tomasello, 1995)? And when a particular interpretation has been

negotiated in a discourse, it generates further activities (Schoen, 1979): ethical debates about the implications of ‘deciphering the book of life’ act upon, rather than question, the assumption that establishing a person’s DNA-sequence tells you as much about that person as reading a book tells you about the contents of that book. Metaphors seem to play a vital role in keeping discussions going, at least in the discourse genres of the English-speaking world, such as science, education, and public discourse. The bottom line is: metaphor understanding in the real world might not be a matter of milliseconds passing until an individual study participant responds. It might rather be a matter of dialogue, of engagement in debate.

At this point, it may be worth repeating that there is of course a commonly embraced response to the tension between psycholinguistic and discourse-analytic approaches to ‘metaphor understanding’ that we are pointing out here: Psycholinguists study what metaphor *is*, discourse analysts study how metaphors are *used*. The results from one field are of limited relevance to the work of the other. This is one way of cutting the pie. However, for the sake of argument, let’s take seriously the ‘usage-based’ credo that things are what they are because of their use. In this case, we need to discuss what we want ‘metaphor understanding’ to mean.

3 Perspectives on metaphor understanding

To the hearer, most metaphors seem ‘transparent’ (Guttenplan, 2006), and in a minimal sense, metaphor understanding seems to be rather effortless. Let’s assume we are engaged in a conversation about the meaning of life. As a seasoned metaphor scholar, you might be tempted to suggest that life is a journey, but on this occasion you want to be more original and choose a different evergreen as your metaphor vehicle. So you say: *Life is a jail*, or maybe *Life is a wolf*, or *Life is the sun*. All of these possible utterances immediately strike me as meaningful in the context of a conversation about the meaning of life. They are meaningful in the sense that I immediately appreciate them *as* contributions to our conversation, rather than as random noise or a string of irrelevant words, and in the sense that I feel I could say something in return. Based on my life-long practice of participating in communication, I appreciate their intelligibility. This ‘minimal’ experience of understanding might best be thought of as a sensation rather than as the result of ‘cold’ information-processing. This intuition is in line with proposals regarding the embodied nature of human understanding (Gibbs, 2005; Indurkha, 1999).

In the psycholinguistic literature, however, metaphor understanding is usually envisaged as involving a ‘full’ interpretation:

For example, consider *that film was a sermon*. For people who are not familiar with the film in question, there can be no a priori representation of the concept *that film* that includes properties such as *preachy* or *moralistic*. Yet these are exactly the sorts of properties that come to mind upon reading the statement, even when the film is not familiar to the reader. (McGlone and Manfredi, 2001: 1210)

In this study by McGlone and Manfredi participants were required to press a key on the computer keyboard once they had achieved a ‘full understanding’ of each metaphor in the experiment (McGlone and Manfredi, 2001: 1212), which was assumed to look something like the interpretation given by the authors in the above quote. Experimental designs involving reaction times are commonly used in psycholinguistics to study how people arrive at such ‘full understandings’ of metaphor. Evidently, it is a different understanding of understanding that is implicit in such studies. Here, understanding is a telic project to be fulfilled entirely by the individual: it means identifying the right attributes (*preachy, moralistic*) and attributing them to the topic. Once this has been done, the goal of metaphor comprehension has been reached.

But doesn’t thinking of a ‘preachy’ and ‘moralistic’ quality of sermons in the context of a film already require an understanding of the metaphor (Black, 1993 [1979])? Arguably, the process of coming to such a well articulated understanding involves embedding it in a meaningful narrative. Recent work shows that the ‘same’ metaphor can be understood quite differently depending on the narrative it becomes embedded in (Hellsten, 2000; Musolf, 2004) – *that* film might be a sermon because it is preachy and moralistic, but *this* film is a sermon because it is overlong and boring. For somebody else, the same film is a sermon because it grabs the viewer and gives her a renewed sense of meaning. Metaphors invite narratives – and it is the construction of the (metaphorical) narrative in a discourse community that gives the topic event meaning (Bruner, 1991). From this perspective, there is no ‘full’ understanding of a metaphor – rather, attempts at understanding are discontinued once these attempts generate more boredom than insight.

The study of text and talk in context therefore throws up the question whether we actually ‘understand’ every word we hear in the strong, information-processing sense of ‘working out’² all the entailments and implications. This view, in which understanding is an individual

project of theorizing about somebody else's meaning, necessitated by a supposed 'gap' between my mind and yours, is strongly entrenched in Western academic thinking about meaning and understanding. But arguably, the effortlessness of most communication as experienced by participants is due not to the immense power of our mental 'computers', but because much of the time no such gap exists when we are engaged in communication (Leudar and Costall, 2004). If we were working so hard all of the time just to make sense of each other, surely a three-day weekend would be in order!

In any case, the 'felt' understanding of a metaphor such as *life is a jail* is something very different from having an explicit list of predications that this metaphor can be taken to make about the meaning of life! In *that* sense, it would, as the information-processing perspective suggests, require some work for me to say what it could mean to say that life is a jail, or, indeed, a journey.³ But such an explicit interpretation might be not so much a *precondition* of understanding metaphors, but rather the *result* of debating what it would mean to view life as a jail, i.e. what would follow from adopting this perspective. An understanding in this 'fuller' sense might require the work of formulating and discussing (with others or oneself) possible interpretations.⁴ From the perspective of studying metaphorical text and talk in context, the hard work of 'working out' an interpretation seems to be distributed across participants in communication. Such communication can transcend immediate situational contexts and build up over time to discursive traditions. How long such diachronic continuity of metaphor can be assumed to last is still largely unexplored. The 'strict father' model of the family for the state in contemporary political discourse (Lakoff, 1996) has been related to centuries-old idioms, but should it be linked to Aristotle's (384–322 BC) comparison of state and family in the *Politics* (Aristotle, 1995)? How can we ascertain which discursive traditions are still of relevance for the understanding of metaphors of such 'long duration'?

We have hinted at four ways to understand understanding: 'embodied' understanding as a sensation of meaningfulness, 'dialogic' understanding as ongoing participation in a conversation, 'information-processing' understanding by individuals working out attributes and implications, and 'historically situated' understanding that includes awareness of discourse traditions 'revived' in topical uses. Discourse-analytic approaches study metaphorical meaning and understanding as it is embedded in discursive activity. This perspective on metaphor can contribute to the theoretical inquiry into fundamental questions, such as our understanding of metaphor understanding.

Notes

1. Although the conclusions regarding the generality of ideas involved in metaphor understanding are reached on different grounds in the 'conceptual metaphor' and the 'relevance theory' approach, this shared conclusion has encouraged researchers to explore possible complementarities between the two approaches (Gibbs and Tendahl, 2006).
2. The idea that linguistic meaning requires 'working out' is prominent in the Gricean understanding of understanding (see Clark, 1996, p. 141).
3. The variety of interpretations given by participants in Glucksberg's (1999) study suggests that the meaning of a relatively conventional metaphor such as *life is a journey* is not at all obvious.
4. The point that explicit understanding is a dialogic process that depends on formulation for an 'Other' (even if that is oneself) should be intuitive to anyone who has started writing an essay with vague ideas and in the process 'discovered' much clearer ideas. The point has been developed systematically by W. v. Humboldt (Humboldt, 1963 [1830–35], vol. 3, pp. 428–9, 437).

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