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Understanding metaphors : the alethic theory

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Stefán Snævarr, associate professor in philosophy. Ph.D. from the University of Bergen i 1998. The name of his dissertation was *Minerva and the Muses. The Place of Reason in Aesthetic Judgement*. He has published a number of papers on the philosophy of literature, aesthetics, ethics, metaphors and narratives.

Sammendrag: I denne artikkelen introduserer forfatteren sin teori om hvordan vi forstår metaforer. Han mener at det er metaforenes kognitive funksjon som gir oss en basis for å forstå dem. Vi forstår en metafor **M** hvis og bare hvis vi vet under hvilke omstendingheter **M** kan sies å være korrekt. Forfatteren sammenligner metaforer med karikaturer og hyperboler. Som ledd i begrunnelsen for denne teorien kritiserer forfatteren metaforteoriene til filosofene Max Black og Donald Davidson.

Emneord: Metaforer, forståelse, sannhet, Davidson, Black.

Abstract: The author introduces his theory of the understanding of metaphors. He maintains that it is the cognitive function of metaphors which gives us a basis for understanding them. We understand a metaphor **M** if and only if we know what kind of conditions must obtain if **M** can be said to be correct. The author compares metaphors to hyperboles and caricatures. As means to justify his theory, he criticises the theories of Max Black and Donald Davidson.

Keywords: Metaphors, understanding, truth, Davidson, Black.

Forord

Dette paperet har sine røtter i forskjellige papers som jeg har presentert her og der, nå sist på et internt seminar her på HIL, og i slutten av august i 2001 på Den fjortende verdenskongressen for estetikere i Makuhari i Japan. Spesielt takk til Jerrold Levinson og Peter Lamarque for hard, men rettferdig kritikk av Japan-paperet. Stort takk skylder jeg også Halvor Nordby og Terje Ødegaard for meget interessant drøfting av paperet som jeg fremla på et intern seminar her på HIL. Videre har jeg fått interessant respons fra en rekke deltakere på mailinglisten "figurative language".

Introduction

Are metaphors anything but masques we put on sentences at the masquerade of language? What do we see when the masques fall off at midnight? The ugly reality of literal meaning?

We will see in this paper that the masque theory of metaphors is not very convincing, a metaphor is more than just ornament, it also has cognitive functions. In order to show this, I will present my so-called 'alethic theory' of the understanding of metaphors. I maintain that the precondition for understanding metaphors (*both* linguistic and non-linguistic) is to understand the way they represent reality, a way of representation, which gives them their basic cognitive import.Notice that I am only talking about the understanding of metaphors, I will *not* try to answer the thorny question whether or not linguistic metaphors have a special meaning. Notice also that I am *not* talking about the psychological processes of understanding, I am talking about its logic. This means that I am trying to uncover the conditions that must obtain if person **P** can be said to have correctly understood metaphor **M**.

I call my theory 'alethic' for two reasons. The first reason is that I think that the cognitive functions of metaphors bears some resemblance to Heidegger's idea of 'aletheia' or 'disclosure'(Unverborgenheit). The German *Meisterdenker* seems to think that propositional truth is depended upon some kind of absolute presuppositions which constitute conceptual schemes. These presuppositions have no truth values but constitute the truth values of propositions, just like the *Ur*-metre in Paris makes measurement in the metric system possible, but the question of measuring the *Ur*-metre in terms of the metric system is meaningless. The presuppositions so to speak open up vistas of possible truth, *discloses* them. The question whether or not metaphors can be said to be absolute presuppositions ('root metaphors') is an interesting one but I will rather focus on their ability to disclose. We will return to these matters later and in the meantime take a look at my second reason: I think that we understand metaphors by virtue of knowing their truth-like values, in a somewhat similar fashion as we understand certain linguistic strings by knowing the truth-conditions of the propositions, expressed by the strings.As is well known, 'aletheia' in Greek means 'truth' and can also be translated as 'that which is obvious' or 'the real'. However, I use the word 'alethic' in a broad sense, I do not just connect it to truth. I use the concept of alethic values as ranging over both truth/falsity and truth-like values such as 'the correctness of a map', 'the degree of a picture's resemblance to its object' etc. Alethic values have in other words to do with the way meaningful entities (for instance pictures, models, maps, theories, propositions, sentences and last, but not least metaphors) referentially relate to segments of reality. The values in question are the yardsticks for our cognitive efforts.

It has to be emphasised that this analysis neither commits me to any objectivistic nor subjectivistic conception of the relationship between meaningful entities and objects. The question whether or not these entities can mirror their objects in an objective fashion is irrelevant for my project.

I. From Black to Davidson and back

It does not seem plausible that *non-lingual symbolic structures* (**N.L.S.S**.), i.e. diagrams, maps, caricatures etc, can be adequately 'translated' into words (what would such a translation of a map of Tokyo look like?). This can be of importance for our understanding of metaphors, especially if Max Black is right about metaphors having less in common with descriptive statements than with maps, diagrams and suchlike. Metaphors, just like maps and diagrams, are not equivalent to a finite number of propositions, Black says. Further, metaphors are not elliptic similes, in some ways they create similarities rather than express them, as we indeed will see later. To be sure, metaphors have different similarity- and comparison-statements as implications, but as Black says: 'Implication is not the same as covert identity: looking at a scene through blue spectacles is different from comparing that scene to something else.' Therefore, metaphors cannot be paraphrased in literal language. Certainly, we can paraphrase parts of the relations between the two subjects of the metaphor (Man and wolf in 'Man is a wolf') literally but one should not expect too much of such a paraphrase. One reason among others is that a paraphrase would present the implications of the metaphor as being of equal importance while the metaphor itself gives the receiver (reader/hearer) the opportunity to weigh the importance in his/her own fashion. This is a strange argument because there is no reason why the receiver should not be able to judge the importance of the paraphrased implications. But if Black is right, then we are on the way to an understanding of why we should see **A** as being metaphorically **B** even if it is not literally **B**. Usually, conceptual boundaries are not rigid but elastic and permeable, Black says. He must mean that there can be cases where we can see **A** as **B** metaphorically, simply because there are no clear-cut boundaries between them. Black adds that the literal resources of our language are often insufficient to express our sense of the rich correspondence and analogies of domains conventionally separated. Black says that metaphors are cognitive devices without having truth-conditions, just like maps, models and diagrams. I think that this is quite correct and I will add that the similarities between metaphors and the **N.L.S.S**.'s is an indicator that metaphors have their own alethic values, different from the truth-values of propositions, theories etc. Black says that in some ways the metaphor transforms its object (Man 'becomes' wolf). To understand this he asks us to see what happens if we use the vocabulary of chess to describe a battle. This would lead to the highlighting of certain aspects of the battle while others are being downplayed or downright ignored. The vocabulary in question filters and transforms that which it describes and perhaps shows us aspects of the phenomenon (the battle) which would have been hidden without this particular vocabulary. It might for instance filter out the emotional aspect of the battle. Thus a metaphor like 'a battle is a game of chess' transforms the object but the transformation is no flight of fancy, it is constrained by facts about the battle. The metaphor creates objects but not ex nihilo; the chess metaphor forms the pre-existing battle into a chess-like phenomenon.

I think it could be fruitful to liken this metaphorical 'transfiguration of commonplaces (topoi)' to the way in which mathematical models applied to non-mathematical physical reality transforms that reality into something mathematical and filters out

those aspects of physical reality which escape mathematisation. Again we see a transformation which is not a creation ex nihilo, but the forming of pre-existing objects into a new mould, in our case a mathematical one, constrained by facts about these pre-existing objects. Needless to say, this alleged transformation has been extremely fruitful in the physical sciences, it has vastly increased our knowledge of the physical universe (that is, if we are not labouring under some gigantic illusions about it). If the analogy between mathematisation and the alleged cognitive role of metaphors is fitting then we have found an inning for the theory that metaphors can increase our knowledge.

Black introduces his particular brand of the interaction theory of metaphoric meaning. According to this theory, two thoughts about two different objects are active together when we use a metaphor. These thoughts interact, as can be seen if we take a look at the metaphor 'Man is a wolf'. When we use that metaphor two thoughts are active together. The metaphor organises our picture of man, stresses certain sides of humans, while downplaying others, cf. the chess-metaphor. The word 'wolf' acquires a new meaning, which is not quite its literal meaning and not quite the meaning of any of its synonyms. We not only see humans as somewhat wolfish, but wolves as somewhat human when we grasp the metaphor in question. Further, in order to understand this metaphor it does not suffice to know the usual dictionary meaning of the word, we must also know that which Black calls its 'system of associated commonplaces'. In our culture, we usually associate wolves with loneliness, cruelty etc.; these are parts of 'the system of associated commonplaces' of the word 'wolf'.

However, I do not find Black's theory of interaction particularly convincing. In the first place, I think that his critics (Searle, Lakoff) are right about it being hard to see that we have to understand both the subject and the predicate of a simple metaphoric assertion in the light of each other, and hence differently from the standard use of these expressions. Do we really have to understand 'zero-sum game' as somehow marriage-like in order to understand the metaphor 'marriage is a zero-sum game'? Secondly, I wonder what criteria we have for anybody having really understood expressions, used in metaphors, in the light of each other. What do I know when I know that I and others have seen the wolf as somewhat human and that seeing the animal in this way is an integral part of understanding the metaphor 'Man is a wolf'? What kind of criteria do I have for knowing that I or others possess this knowledge? I cannot for the life of me see what kind of criteria that would be.

Donald Davidson is one of Black's best-known critics. He maintains that metaphors do not express ideas or thoughts. Metaphors belong fairly and squarely to the pragmatics of language, Davidson says. He famously defends a truth conditional semantics; metaphors are more than often untrue and if they are elliptic similes then their meaning is simply literal and their truth trivial. The reason that their truth would be trivial is that everything can be said to be like something else in some respect. The words in a metaphoric utterance like 'Man is a wolf' mean exactly the same as they mean in literal contexts but they are used in a peculiar fashion. No one would say that we use words in a different sense when we lie, speak ironically or tell jokes, so why on earth should the use of words in metaphoric utterances give them a special sense? The fact that an utterance like 'Man is a wolf' can cause associations and reflections is a psychological, contingent fact and therefore without interest for the theory of meaning. The 'systems of association' of words like 'wolf' are contingent and

thus, in contrast to what Black said, have no implication for the meaning of sentences. To be sure, a metaphor cannot be paraphrased but the reason is that there is nothing to paraphrase. An attempted 'paraphrase' is just an attempt to make a list of the thoughts and associations a metaphor can cause, and their number is in principle infinite. In actual fact, it is a misunderstanding to believe that the basic role of metaphors is to convey ideas, Davidson says. To be sure, a metaphor can make us discover facts, but not because it symbolises (represents) facts; in the same manner, jokes, lies or a good cup of coffee can inspire us to discover facts.

However, in ordinary discourse we say 'what is **M** a metaphor for?', not 'what is **J** a joke for' or 'what is **L** a lie for?'. It is intuitively difficult to see how **M** can be a metaphor but for nothing in particular, which might be an indicator that metaphors somehow represent facts. Of course, our intuitions and habits of speech are not infallible; I certainly cannot refute Davidson's analysis just by evoking intuitions and habits. But fortunately, there are some thinkers, including Frank B. Farrell and David Novitz, who have dealt Davidson's arguments severe blows. Farrell is quite right when he points out that Davidson is inconsistent when he says on the one hand that sentences are the smallest meaningful entities of language, yet on the other hand, when discussing metaphors, talks solely about the meaning of words used in metaphors. Both Farrell and Novitz maintain that Davidson is on the wrong track when he says that metaphors only nudge us into noticing differences and similarities between phenomena. He does not understand that we can put forth statements with the aid of metaphors. Farrell and Novitz say that metaphoric utterances can have truth-conditions. Novitz uses as an example an utterance of Anthony in Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar* 'authority melts from me'. Given contextual evidence and a use of the principle of charity, we can construct the following **T**-sentence on the basis of Anthony's metaphor:

' 'authority melts form me' is true, when uttered by Anthony at time **t** if and only if Anthony was losing his power slowly but certainly on or about time**t**.' The fact that such a **T**-sentence hardly has the liveliness and impact of the original metaphor does not matter since Davidson regards impact as belonging to the pragmatics of language. Novitz concludes by saying that if we know the truth-conditions in question we know the meaning of metaphors. So given truth-conditional semantics, metaphoric utterances can be meaningful in their own right. However, this analysis has its faults. It seems to suggest that we can paraphrase metaphors, but as we have already seen that is hardly possible. Further, the fact that there are pictorial metaphors creates problems for the contention that metaphors have truth-values. Pictures do not possess truth-values, and it would be strange if a pictorial metaphor of authority melting would not possess truth-values while its linguistic counterpart did. Since both are understood in a similar fashion it seems natural to look for a common factor which makes them understandable. That factor can hardly be truth-values, but it is fairly obvious that both kinds of metaphors can express (correct or incorrect) beliefs. Anthony can be said to express a belief with his linguistic metaphor and a pictorial cousin could do the same thing.

Be that as it may, if the conception of Man as being wolfish is not an idea, then what is it? Typically, a metaphor involves thoughts (however weird); for instance 'I wonder whether or not Man is a kind of a wolf'. Such thoughts can in many cases

either square or not square with facts, in some cases facts of fictional worlds. So we are back where we started, with the idea of metaphors as being cognitive devices.

II. Understanding caricatures, understanding metaphors.

 I think it is obvious that such **N.L.S.S**.'s as maps, diagrams, visual signs and caricatures are meaningful but as we have seen they have no truth-values. So it is tempting to say that either we understand them by virtue of knowing the truth-values of certain sentences or by, say their (the **N.L.S.S.**'s) specific alethic values. As I said earlier, I think Black is quite correct about the **N.L.S.S.**'s not being entirely translatable into words. Nevertheless we understand them so we hardly grasp their meaning by virtue of knowing the truth-values of certain sentences. Therefore, the latter road seems worth travelling, the road of believing that the knowing of certain alethic values is the precondition for us understanding **N.L.S.S.**'s. I think that the following statement about the understanding of maps and other **N.L.S.S**.'s is true: <u>We understand map **M** (diagram **D** etc) *iff* we know the conditions under which **M** (**D** etc) would be correct.</u>

Now, if Black is right about metaphors having a thing or two in common with maps, diagrams and pictures then we might be heading towards an interesting theory of metaphorical understanding. As I said earlier, I tend to believe that metaphors do not necessarily have to be linguistic, they can be pictorial or behavioural. George Lakoff and his associates quite correctly point out that both pictures and rituals can express metaphors. An example of a metaphorical ritual can be the custom of carrying a new-born baby to the uppermost floor of a house and thus wishing the child a successful life (metaphorically: wishing that the child moves upwards). A caricature can show a person with a green face, a metaphor for an envious individual.

If it makes sense to say that a caricature of a well-known politician looking like a peacock and a linguistic string such as 'that politician is a peacock' are two versions of the same metaphor (or two interrelated metaphors) then it is plausible to maintain that the conditions for their meaningfulness overlap. However, the meaning of a caricature is basically non-linguistic and as we shall see, linguistic metaphors can have cognitive import without having truth-conditions. The overlapping strengthens the idea of cognitive import, which is not a function of truth-values. At the same time we have seen in the first place that in order to understand **N.L.S.S.**'s we must know their alethic values; secondly we have discovered that metaphors have cognitive import. In light of this, it seems intuitively specious that the understanding of metaphors has something to do with knowing their cognitive powers and that the yardstick of these powers must be some kind of alethic value. At the same time, it does not seem likely that the alethic values in question are truth and falsity, both because linguistic metaphors are more often than not either false or trivially true, at least at first glance, and also because it seems plausible that linguistic metaphors share features with pictorial and behavioural metaphors. I propose that we call the alethic value of metaphors (and their logical neighbours whom we will meet later) their 'm-correctness'. Being m-correct is also to be somehow fitting, adequate, right, apt or even disclosing in some Heideggerian sense. But this does not tell us much about m-correctness so let us scrutinise it: A m-correct symbolic structure must have some kind of structural, though definitely not isomorphic, relation with the

objects it represents, but the relation is more like the relation of caricatures to their objects than anything else. Actually, I think it is fairly obvious that even linguistic metaphors are like caricatures of their objects. Just like a caricature of de Gaulle makes his nose grotesquely big in order to highlight his megalomania, a linguistic metaphor like 'Man is a wolf' makes a virtual caricature of Man in order to highlight some of his features (notice that in these cases, there are structural similarities between the symbolic structures and their objects, but certainly not isomorphic relations). Caricatures can be apt or correct, like many of the de Gaulle caricatures, which tell us more about the man than a host of literally true sentences, and something similar holds for metaphors. A metaphor like 'France has become a widow', uttered by Georges Pompidou after de Gaulle's death tells us more about the political stature of de Gaulle than a literally true sentence like 'de Gaulle was the president of France for eleven years.'(Pompidou's linguistic metaphor can hardly be called 'true' since the utterance is strictly speaking false. Therefore its cognitive import (if any) must be connected to an alethic value, different from truth.) Analogously, some of the great caricatures of de Gaulle are more informative of his personality and position than most photographs. Notice that metaphors tend to be like hyperboles, they exaggerate certain aspects of phenomena (the wolf-like features of man) and the same holds for caricatures, cf. the nose of the French president. This fact strengthens our contention that there is a structural similarity between metaphors and caricatures. I also think that my analysis makes it plausible to think that metaphors do not monopolise m-correctness, both caricatures and models (perhaps also similes) can possess this quality (these are among the aforementioned 'logical neighbours'). They rather *disclose* than mirror reality, they *show* rather than tell and have thus an alethic function in a somewhat Heideggerian sense. Now, it is fairly obvious how caricatures or pictorial metaphors show rather than tell, but what about linguistic metaphors? I think we can get inspiration from the theories of Frank Palmer. He contrasts 'showing' with 'telling', the latter being a simple description of states of affairs like 'I am not feeling very well, my wife has left me'. Poems, which are worth their salt do not just contain the poet's descriptions of his state of mind, but rather shows it with the aid of images, metaphors, and such literary devices as rhythm. Palmer only discusses metaphors in passing, but it is fairly obvious that using a fresh linguistic metaphor is not just telling how things are but rather show them in a wide sense of the word. The metaphor's way of showing is probably a distant cousin of the Wittgensteinian sense of showing, which I actually think is related to Heidegger's disclosure. According to Wittgenstein, pictures (in a wide sense of the word) cannot picture the logical form they share with what they are a picture of. Similarly, a tautology cannot say that it is a tautology, it can only show that is a tautology. Needless to say, the last way of showing cannot be visual. My educated guess is that a linguistic metaphors can show things in this non-visual way, 'Feyerabend is the Nietszche of the philosophy of science' can show or disclose aspects of the relationship between the thoughts of these thinkers. However, visualising their thought is not an option. Further, fresh metaphors show in the sense of disclosing phenomena in a new fashion. Both the fresh and the not so fresh metaphors shows us one kind of a thing in terms of another, give us what Lakoff and his associates call an 'indirect understanding' of phenomena. Now, there are probably those who would object to my analysis on the ground that

caricatures and metaphors cannot possibly be said to be correct or incorrect because

they transform reality, and cannot therefore represent it. But as we have seen, the mathematical models of natural scientists certainly transform their object, it does not seem likely that mathematical relations exist in nature. Mathematics and metaphors cause metamorphoses, but these metamorphoses can be cognitively productive.

Given our discussion I think it is fairly obvious that knowing the conditions of a metaphor's m-correctness must be a necessary condition for the understanding of its meaning. This goes for both linguistic and other types of metaphors. So I think that the following is true: <u>I understand metaphor **M** *iff I* know under which conditions **M** would be m-correct</u>.

Notice that this theory does not imply that metaphors can only be used for cognitive purposes. A metaphor can be used for various ends, including ornamental ones, there are cases where metaphors are masques. The point is that in order to understand a metaphor we must grasp its cognitive import.

We have seen in this paper that Black was right about the cognitive import of metaphors but wrong about metaphoric meaning. We have also discovered that Davidson's analysis of metaphors does not seem very convincing. Further, it seems that metaphors share a host of features with caricatures and hyperboles, and that they disclose or show rather then tell. Most importantly, metaphors have certain conditions of correctness, the knowing of which enables us to understand them.

A masque can be very seductive, and in the Italian film 'Il Postino' an old lady maintains that 'metaphor' must mean 'seduction'. In a way, the old woman was right, we use metaphors as means to seduce reality, lure it to reveal its true nature.

Metaphorics and erotics are one.