# Didactic metaphors in Alan Gardiner's linguistic discourse

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**Resumen**: En este artículo me propongo captar la atención sobre la capacidad extraordinaria de Alan Gardiner de crear metáforas didácticas para sus lectores con el objetivo de clarificar una serie de conceptos y distinciones esenciales que se refieren al lenguaje. La obra que he tomado en consideración es el tratado *The Theory of Speech and Language*, del cual he extraído y ordenado casi 30 metáforas didácticas empleadas de Gardiner en su discurso lingüístico.

**Palabras clave**: *Alan Gardiner*, *esencia del lenguaje*, *discurso lingüístico*, *metáforas didácticas*, *conceptos primarios y secundarios*.

**1.** Sir Alan Gardiner [1879-1963] is (still) known today in the scientific community thanks mainly to his essential contributions to the field of Egyptology, since his legacy includes, among other things, a fundamental masterpiece for all Egyptologists: *Egyptian Grammar* (1st edition, 1927). However, Gardiner is also the author of a very good treatise of linguistic theory, entitled *The Theory of Speech and Language* (1st edition, 1932; 2nd edition, 1951), a book which Eugenio Coseriu highly appreciated, deploring the fact that such an extraordinary work has been ignored over the last decades (see Coseriu, 1985: xxv-xxvi; Coseriu, 1992: 76-80; Coşeriu, 1994: 27-29)[1].

**2.** Alan Gardiner was not only a reputed specialist and researcher, but also a gifted teacher. Besides the theoretical content proper of the above-mentioned treatise, the ability of this linguist to use analogies or clarifying comparisons impresses his readers from the very beginning. It seems that Gardiner's permanent intention is for his discourse to be as comprehensible as possible to his readers. For this reason, while explaining concepts and

[1] However, it is worth mentioning, in the case of linguistic pragmatics, the reconsideration of Alan Gardiner's contribution concerning the theory of speech acts (where he is regarded as a forerunner of John Austin) (see Moeschler, Reboul, 1999: 35-69).

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fundamental distinctions for the domain of human language, the great British philologist commonly inserts in his scientific discourse numerous and ample "didactic metaphors" (as I suggest naming them in what follows)[2].

**3.** His didactic metaphors can be classified in different ways, according to various criteria. I decided to present the collected material starting from the notions meant to be clarified, which I grouped in two large categories:

(A) *primary concepts*, regarding *the essence of language* (which is of interest, most of all, to the philosophy of language), such as «language in general» [cf. Fr. *langage*], «language», «speech» or «communication», «text», etc., with a special focus on the way in which these "realities" manifest themselves (or "function");

(B) *secondary concepts*, regarding *the structure of language* (which is usually of interest to the theory of language and general linguistics), such as those concerning the levels of language and the various linguistic units.

This distinction is not a firm one, since it would be difficult to prove that some of the concepts included in the latter category are not "essential" (for instance, «form» and «meaning» in the case of the levels of linguistic analysis); nevertheless, it serves here to render Alan Gardiner's analogies in a unitary manner.

Collecting a much richer material from many other sources would even lead to elaborating a *sui generis* dictionary of linguistic terms (based on numerous quotations), where the respective terms would not be rigorously defined (as it usually happens), but explained by means of didactic metaphors extracted from the work of certain remarkable linguists.

Next, I will reproduce almost 30 quotations taken from Alan Gardiner's treatise, *The Theory of Speech and Language* (from now on abbreviated as TSL), all of them containing didactic metaphors. My comments will be concise, since I am mostly interested, in this case, in presenting the extracted material in a coherent manner.

**(A) *Primary concepts*, regarding *the essence of language***

(1) Before rendering the analogies concerning language as such, I think it is also worth indicating here the metaphorical way in which Gardiner presents the relation between the *linguistic science* (the theory) and *language*. The relation is similar to that between a *landscape* and the *pictorial art*: "No science or philosophy exists which is not presented in terms of written language. But the sentences and words used for this purpose are no more identical with that philosophy or science than a landscape framed and hung upon the wall is identical with the landscape seen from yonder hill. [...] Is not a distortion similar to that of pictorial art inherent in all verbal description, and should not a solidly grounded linguistic theory be the recognized prolegomena to all serious thinking?" (TSL, p. 14).

(2) The relation between *language* and *speech* resembles the relationship between a *mother* and her *child*: "Language is the mother of all speech, educating it and by past example setting the standard it is expected to follow. But the youngster is vigorous and experimental, and will often go its own way. Wise is the mother who tempers discipline with good grace in yielding, for she in time will pass away and her offspring become the

[2] Not all linguists (and the same can be asserted about scientists in general) resort to clarifying (or convincing) metaphors. Among the linguists who have a preference for this type of analogies, scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir, Otto Jespersen and Sextil Puşcariu are to be mentioned here. See, for instance, some of my articles (Munteanu, 2008; Munteanu, 2011; Munteanu, 2014; Munteanu, 2015 and Munteanu 2016); see also some of Ioan Milică's articles (Milică, 2013 and Milică, 2015).



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parent in turn. In the interest of the family fortunes, rules of conduct must always be open to revision, though it is inevitable that the transitional stages should reveal some trace of friction." (TSL, p. 175).

(3) The *functioning of speech* is somehow similar to the way in which the *telephone* or the *wireless* works, although, according to Gardiner, the knowledge of language is much more complex than that of the above-mentioned mechanisms: "The problem which I am setting before myself may best be indicated by a comparison. Suppose an intelligent boy to be inquiring how the telephone or the wireless works. If the question were rightly addressed, the answer would doubtless supply a clear account of the mechanism – an account which, without penetrating very deeply into the laws of physics, would satisfy the inquirer and carry with it immediate conviction. Could a like question be profitably put to the ordinary philologist? Could he be trusted to give a sensible reply to the inquiry what language is and how speech works?" (TSL, p. 5).

(4) *Communication* and *paying by cheque* are very much alike: "A word or sequence of words is uttered, its sound is heard, and its sense apprehended. The transaction might seem as simple as the giving of a cheque in the place of cash. The scholar's habit of attending too exclusively to books has probably done much to encourage this illusion." (TSL, p. 29).

(5) *Communication* looks like a *guessing game* (which reminds us of the binary code): "Another comparison which will answer my purpose equally well is the familiar game of animal, vegetable or mineral. One of the party is sent out of the room, while the remainder decide upon something which he is to guess. The guesser, on his return, puts a series of questions which may be answered only by *Yes* or *No. Is it animal? Is it vegetable? Is it mineral?* And so forth, until the field of possibilities is so narrowed that the guesser sees what is meant. In exactly the same way the function of words is to make the listener 'see what is meant'. They are, in fact, 'clues'. The thing-meant is itself never shown, but has to be identified by the listener on the basis of the word-meanings submitted to him for that purpose." (TSL, pp. 33-34).

(6) *Speech* can be compared to *drama*: "The attentive reader will by this time have accustomed himself to think of speech as a form of drama needing a minimum of two actors, a scene or situation of its own, a plot or 'thing-meant', and as a last element the extemporized words." (TSL, p. 106).

(7) *Speech* or *text* is similar to a *dramatic situation* or even to a *game of cricket*: "In 'speech' or 'text', on the contrary, we can still discern speaker and listener engaged in a single dramatic situation, the plot of which is what I have termed the thing-meant; or, to change the simile, 'text' presupposes a bowler and a batsman, though what is of greatest importance is the score made." (TSL, pp. 329-330).

(8) The *process of speech* resembles the *cinematographic technique*: "The interpretation of speech, like all linguistic processes, has become highly mechanized and is, therefore, almost instantaneous. But if we could behold interpretation immensely slowed down, as the movements of horses or athletes may often be seen at the cinema, we should undoubtedly recognize it as gradual, and to some extent following the consecutive fall of the words." (TSL, p. 244).

(9) *Mind* or *thought* (in relation with speech) is similar a *flowing river*: "My quarrel with Wundt is twofold: firstly, that he has overlooked the purposeful, calculating character of speech; and secondly, that he takes far too static a view of thought. He seems to ignore the fact that the mind is as volatile and as restless as a flowing river." (TSL, p. 249).



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(10) The *speaker* and a *commercial traveller* seem to have a lot in common: "The speaker may be compared to a commercial traveller who is unable to show the actual wares in which he traffics, but who carries in his bag various samples and books of patterns." (TSL, p. 33).

(11) The *terminological precision* is similar to an *observatory chronometer*: "No amount of pedantic advice is going to cure anyone of loose speech, for which it is a good defence that, so long as we can make our audience understand what is intended, the language employed is a secondary consideration. An observatory chronometer need not be used to keep an appointment for tea." (TSL, p. 34).

(12) The *precision of certain words* in relation to their corresponding designated things can be compared to that of an *arrow* to its mark: "Now language has created certain words which travel as directly to their ultimate thing-meant as an arrow to its mark." (TSL, p. 267).

(13) *Speech*, as "reaction" to a stimulus, resembles only partly the *chemical "reaction"* (in this context, the term *reaction* is used metaphorically): "But in adopting in reference to speech the metaphorical term 'reaction' I must again warn the reader against certain implications which that term has derived from chemistry and physical science. Blue litmus-paper, if dipped in an acid solution, turns red; if dipped in an alkali, it shows no reaction. Some human reactions are doubtless almost as automatic and invariable as that of litmus-paper; a man writhes or flinches when he feels intense pain. But speech, at all events, is neither automatic nor invariable, and in regarding it as reaction to a stimulus we merely recall the facts that some relatively objective thing must impinge upon the mind before speech arises, and that, when speech does arise, it both stands in a causal relation to the stimulus and is of a lively and purposive quality." (TSL, p. 263).

**(B) *Secondary concepts*, regarding *the structure of language***

**(a) Suprasegmental features**

(14) The issue of *intonation* is revealed by means of a comparison between *linguistics* and *astronomy*: "I will compare the part played in language by such forms and rules as these to the part played in astronomy by celestial movements. In astronomy the units are the stars and the planets, just as words are the units of language. But the existence of such units in both sciences does not exclude the co-existence in them of other constituent facts of a more abstract and intangible kind." (TSL, p. 93).

(15) The way in which the *pitch* varies resembles the spreading of *butter on bread*: "But over and above the elocutional form attaching to words there exist differentiated schemes of sentence-intonation (mainly variations of pitch) which do not adhere to the component words of a sentence permanently, but are spread over the whole arbitrarily and as something extraneous, like butter upon bread." (TSL, p. 202).

**(b) Expression (form) and content (meaning) in language**

(16) *Word-form* can be compared to the *overtone* of a musical note: "It would be useless to know that *puerorum* is a plural unless it were simultaneously known what it is the plural of. In view of its subsidiary nature, word-form may be compared to the overtone of a musical note." (TSL, p. 131).

(17) The same image is resumed and enhanced by means of another comparison, which involves a *chain of beads*: "Now in connexion with word-form we learnt that individual words may possess, in addition to the direct reference to things given by their stem-meaning, a sort of subsidiary meaning which is best compared to the overtone of a musical note. Thus the word *boy*, a noun, carries with it a feeling that the thing signified by



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it is substantival, is to be taken as a thing. In just the same way, sentence-quality may be compared to a kind of overtone or harmonic spread over the whole of the sentence taken as a unity, and not necessarily or permanently attaching to the constituent words. Or to employ a different image, the purpose inherent in a sentence is like a thread running through a chain of beads, a means of binding them together and yet no part of them." (TSL, pp. 191-192).

(18) The *significations* of words and their corresponding *designations* are compared to the various *train stations* in a town: "Firstly, it must be recognized that in the application of some words meaning and thing-meant are so nearly juxtaposed that only in a limited degree can they be regarded as separate objectives; they may be compared to the nearer and remoter stations of one and the same town, some trains stopping at the hither stations, while others run on to the terminus; the town itself is reached by both kinds of train." (TSL, p. 257).

**(c) Linguistic units (according to the levels of language)**

(19) Characterizing the *sounds of speech*, Gardiner resorts to a bizarre "negative" comparison in order to differentiate the sounds of speech from *airplanes*: "To use a metaphor, the sounds of speech are not aeroplanes invented for the purpose of carrying thoughts as their passengers between man and man. It must be repeated that psychical life is completely inalienable." (TSL, p. 69).

(20) *Words* are similar to the *beams* of light: "Verbal context is not in itself a situation, but together with gesture and tone of voice is the principal means of showing the situation. Each word is like a beam of light, illumining first this portion and then that portion of the field within which the thing, or rather the complex concatenation of things (*Sachverhalt*), signified by a sentence lies. Sometimes the direction of the beams remains constant, each successive word merely narrowing the area covered by its predecessor." (TSL, p. 51).

(21) *Words* resemble *building materials*: "Words do not all resemble one another. They may be likened to the stones in a builder's yard, of different materials and of different shapes. They have been hewn into diverse shapes for special purposes, some meant for this position in the building and some for that. In themselves they carry a presumption of their future use, but at the last moment the builder may change his mind, and use a particular stone in a way for which it was not intended. In skilled hands, a stone so employed may perhaps be even more effective than another originally destined for the same place." (TSL, p. 175).

(22) A *word* is similar to a *pound sterling*: "In point of fact, a word is no more and no less of an abstraction than the pound sterling. And who, especially in these days, would get any advantage out of calling the pound sterling an abstraction? The analogy is almost perfect, and deserves meditation." (TSL, p. 94).

(23) *Words* can be compared to the *seconds* measured by a ticking watch: "Arguing along these lines, we might conceive of the many-word sentence as a mere sequence of clues having each the same importance and functional power, comparable, let us say, to the even ticking of a watch, where every second resembles every other with a dead monotony." (TSL, p. 129).

(24) *Words* are similar to *plants* (considered as species, not as individuals): "In what manner, then, does the method which I am advocating differ from that of the orthodox grammarian? The botanist may be called upon to point the road. Words being so constituted



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as to be used over and over again, they are comparable, not to individual plants, but to the botanical species of which those individual plants are specimens." (TSL, p. 6).

(25) *Words* and *set phrases* (i.e. phraseological units) undergo a process of "*fossilization*": "The principle to be illustrated may be termed *the mechanization of speech*, though by another metaphor it might equally have been characterized as the 'fossilization of words and phrases'." (TSL, p. 45).

(26) *Sentences* are similar to some *ephemeral constructions*, built ad hoc, for certain purposes: "Sentences are like *ad hoc* constructions run up for a particular ceremony, constructions which are pulled down and their materials dispersed as soon as their particular purpose has been served." (TSL, p. 90).

(27) The structure of a *sentence* resembles the content of a *house* (with its constituents): "Just as the 'thing' called a house comprises other things as doors, windows, curtains, floors, so too the thing denoted by a sentence comprises as many things as there are words in it." (TSL, p. 26).

**4. By way of conclusion**

Seen as a product of a universal human activity, language is a cultural object. One can observe that, in order to explain the functioning (and nature) of language and of its constituting elements, Alan Gardiner resorts – by means of analogy – to either other cultural objects, or to various natural objects, or (rarely) to formal/mathematical objects. A further remark is worth adding: the objects with which the linguistic aspects and elements are compared belong, more often than not, to "common sense" – hence the mainly didactic feature of these "discursive" metaphors. Sometimes, the objects (and their corresponding processes) invoked are taken from the sphere of rigorous science, but the level of discussion is not an "endogenous" one (i.e. strictly specialized); it rather belongs to the didactic (or even vulgarizing) scientific discourse. On the other hand, one should notice that didactic metaphors are not only didactic, since they can suggest even to their author new ways of approaching the object under study, which is meant to be described later to others.

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