GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TRADITIONAL AND COGNITIVE APPROACH TO METAPHOR

Daniela DĂLĂLĂU[1]

Abstract

This paper aims to present some of the most relevant approaches to the study of metaphor. Being a widespread feature of everyday language, metaphor has been the subject of different and sometimes controversial theories advanced not only by linguists, but also by philosophers, psychologists etc.

Keywords: metaphor, conceptual metaphor, cognitive approach, theories, language

I. Introduction

Metaphor has been subject of debate and analysis since ancient times and one of the questions philosophers, scholars, linguists, etc. have tried to answer is "***what are metaphors***?". Although the question has always been the same, answers given to it have been varied, fact which has led to the emergence of different and sometimes controversial ideas and theories. Being studied from a number of different perspectives, a wide variety of disciplines including, linguistics, philosophy, literary studies, psychology and education among others, have attempted to define, describe and analyse metaphors.

Metaphors are part of our everyday language. Some of these metaphors are so often used that one is unaware of their metaphorical meanings and they stop being perceived as metaphors.

Concerning the definition of metaphor, much of the difficulty in defining it originates in the problem of whether it is best considered as a linguistic phenomenon related to how we express things or as a cognitive phenomenon related to how we understand them (Cameron & Low, 1999). Therefore, the problems of defining metaphor arise from the complexity of the relationship between thought and language.

II. The traditional approach to metaphor

Scholars in ancient times regarded metaphors as belonging exclusively to the domain of rhetoric. Therefore, they analysed them alongside other tropes as imaginative, poetic, ornamental devices. Explanations of what metaphors are can be traced back to Aristotle. In his well-known works *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* most studies focus on his discussion on the place of metaphor in language as well as its relationship with

[1] Teaching Assistant, Petru Maior University, Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)

communication. In "Poetics" (around 335 BC), Aristotle defines "metaphor" as: "...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". The key characteristic of his definition refers to a specific transference of a word from one context into another.

Traditional approaches regard metaphors as mere literary figures of speech or deviations from some supposedly literal language. For a long time the dominant view of metaphor was that it is the "exclusive domain of literary scholars and the odd linguist who was interested in rhetoric or stylistics"(Ungerer & Schmid 1996: 114). This traditional view of metaphor, in which it is regarded as a linguistic phenomenon that falls largely in the realm of "poetic" or "figurative" language, does nothing else but to relegate this very important phenomenon to the level of an "ornamental device used in rhetorical style" (Ungerer & Schmid 1996: 114).

The traditional approach to metaphor was governed by some general assumptions that were later denied by linguists developing the contemporary approach to the study of metaphor.

a) The first assumption of the traditional view of metaphors is that they are regarded, like all other rhetorical devices, as being deviations from everyday language usage and they are seen as being "parasitic on the core semantics and literal meaning" (Fauconnier 1994: 1). This assumption is based on the premise that "all everyday conventional language is literal and none is metaphorical" (Lakoff 1993: 204).

b) The second assumption is that metaphors are merely a matter of words. One of those who proves this assumption wrong is Sweetser (1990: 8). In order to demonstrate that metaphor is not just mere words she provides the example of the use of the word "white" to mean "honest" or "candid" rather than using the word for "purple". She explains that it is a fact about the cultural community that they see whiteness as metaphorically standing for honesty or moral purity. Moreover, she states that this system of metaphorical uses of colour terms is not based on a systematic correlation between colours and morality in the world but is present in the speakers' linguistic and cultural models.

c) The third assumption states that there has to be literal language first, for us to have metaphor. According to this assumption metaphor was defined as "a novel or poetic linguistic expression" where one or more words for a concept are used outside of their normal conventional meaning to express a "similar concept" (Lakoff 1993: 202).

As shown before, within the traditional approach, metaphors are simply regarded as a matter of language, being a substitution of literal words with metaphorical words.

The approach taken by the rhetorician Richards (1936), who is cited in Hoffman and Honneck (1980: 5), states that metaphors consist of three things:

- the thing that is being commented upon, the *topic* which he called the ***tenor,***

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)

- the thing which is used to talk about the topic, which he called the ***vehicle***, and
- the relation between the topic and the vehicle, which he calls the ***ground***.

The traditional view of metaphor concentrates on the principle of transference of qualities from one thing to another, which is a result of using the *vehicle* in place of the ordinary language.

III. The cognitive approach to metaphor

The major shift in terms of perceiving metaphors happened when linguists replaced the notion of metaphors as a deviant use of language with a view that stated that metaphors are an essential device in human thought and discourse. By stating that human reasoning is largely figurative, linguists have attempted to determine not only the role of metaphors in our cognitive activity but also the way in which we use metaphors to communicate our thoughts.

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson approached the idea of metaphors differently in their book – *Metaphors we live by*. In this book, they developed a new theory that has become known as the *cognitive view of metaphor*. Some years later, Lakoff renamed it and referred to it as the "contemporary theory of metaphor" (1993: 202).

According to this new perspective, the metaphor is defined as a cognitive mechanism whereby one conceptual domain is partially mapped onto a different conceptual domain, the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one: "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (1980: 5). The domain that is mapped is called the *source* and the domain onto which it is mapped is called the *target*. In a later revised version, Lakoff provides further explanations and defines metaphors as "permanent mental mappings between source domains and target domains" (1993).

One central idea running through these works is that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discovered and described a system of ordinary, conceptual metaphors, lying behind much of everyday language. As Lakoff and Turner (1989: xi) put it "metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it. It is omnipresent: metaphor suffuses our thoughts, no matter what we are thinking about."

Following this idea, Goatly (1997: 41) makes a distinction between active and inactive metaphors. The latter category refers to metaphors that have become lexicalized and as a result, they acquire a second conventional meaning, being defined and used with this second meaning in dictionaries.

Having as starting point the work of Lakoff and Johnson, Goatly spreads some light on the ways in which certain basic analogies structure the lexicon of English. His theory is based on the Experiential Hypothesis:

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)

> "[...] We have certain preconceptual experiences as infants, such as experiences of body movement, our ability to move objects, to perceive them as wholes and retain images of them; and certain image-schemata which recur in our everyday bodily experience, e.g. containers, paths, balance, up and down, part and whole, front and back. The hypothesis claims that most abstract concepts arise from these preconceptual physical experiences by metaphorical projection." (Goatly, 1997: 41)

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have used conventional metaphors to support their idea that much of our everyday talk (and, hence, as they claim, much of our thought, and much of our reality) is structured metaphorically:

> "…the generalizations governing poetic metaphorical expressions are not in language but in thought; they are general mappings across domains. These general principles which take the form of conceptual mappings apply not just to novel poetic expressions but to much of ordinary everyday language." (1993: 203)
>
> Furthermore, he makes some further reference by adding that:
>
> "The locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings." (1993: 203)

This implies that most of our abstract categories are organised cognitively by structures borrowed from more concrete categories. In cognitive linguistics (CL), conceptual metaphors are thus defined as "a mapping of the structure of a source model onto a target model" (Ungerer and Schmid 1996: 120). These mappings are realised linguistically. For instance, the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY is reflected in the linguistic expressions such as "You're wasting my time", "This gadget will save you hours", "Is that worth your while", "He's living on borrowed time" etc. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 7-8). According to Lakoff and Johnson, there are three different types of conceptual metaphors:

(1) structural metaphors refer to the organisation of one concept in terms of another (e.g. time is money),

(2) orientational *metaphors* are concerned with the (mostly spatial) organisation of a whole range of concepts (e.g. HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN) and

(3) *ontological metaphors* relate to „ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 25)

Starting from all these new premises, other authors have added new ideas or have opposed Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor (MacCornac, 1985; Glucksberg *et al.*, 1992; Stibbe, 1997; Steen, 1999).

MacCornac takes a further look on metaphors from the level of concepts (metaphorical expressions) and then he adds a new dimension to metaphors by considering them "cognitive processes".

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)

The idea that the target domain has permanently been given a structure by a source domain, advanced by Lakoff and Johnson, is one that Glucksberg et al., and Steen disagree with. Steen (1999) considers that source domains do not permanently affect the way we are thinking about the target domain. As far as this is concerned, Stibbe introduces a dynamic account of metaphor and explains that metaphorical convention between domains is created temporarily as part of thought processes.

For Steen, metaphors are "psychological tools" (1999: 83) and he suggests three dimensions of metaphors:

a) the *linguistic dimension* or the formal dimension of metaphor;
b) the *psychological dimension*, which refers to the mental structures and processes that are required to produce and understand metaphors, and
c) the *social dimension*, which makes reference to the interactive force of metaphors in communication.

Furthermore, he states that metaphors have to be interdisciplinary and considered as part of these three dimensions: "If metaphor is to be seen as an integral part of human communication, however, these interdisciplinary connections will have to be established and further developed."

Within this new approach of cognitive semantics, the metaphor is assigned more than a purely aesthetic function, as proposed by comparison and substitution theories; rather, it is seen as basic to human cognition and thus salient in the way we speak and talk about the world. Several aspects related to the new approach on metaphor are worth being mentioned, i.e. the claims that metaphor:

- structures human thought, and is thus more than just an element of linguistic surface structure,
- is pervasive and systematic, and
- allows us to understand the abstract through the concrete.

Conclusions

As shown in this paper, the general idea governing the traditional approach to metaphor focused only on the literal content, metaphors being regarded as confusing and merely emotive matters of language, and defined as figures of speech, completely unsuited to serious or scientific discourse. They were solely used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose, their role being primarily decorative and ornamental.

However, the perspective has definitely changed since the emergence of the cognitive view of metaphor. According to this, metaphor is the main mechanism that helps us understand abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning. Furthermore, metaphors are fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic, in nature and they are mostly based on correspondences in our experiences, rather than on similarity.

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)

Bibliography:

Cameron, L. & G. Low. (1999). *Metaphor* in *Language Teaching* 32: 77-96.
Davis, Steven. (1991). *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Fauconniek, Gilles. (1998). *Mental Spaces,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind. Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Goatly, A. (1997). *The language of Metaphors*. London: Routledge.
Glucksberg, S.; Keysar, B., and Mccloney, M. (1992). <Metaphor understanding and accessing conceptual schema: reply to Gibbs>, *Psychological Review*, 99, 3, 578-581.
Lakoff, G. & M. Turner. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Lakoff, G. (1993). "The contemporary theory of metaphor", in Lakoff George and Mark Turner More *Than a Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
MacCornac, E. (1985). *A cognitive theory of metaphor*, Mass., MIT Press.
Steen, G. (1999). <From linguistic to conceptual metaphor in five steps>, 55-77. In R.W. Gibbs Jr. and G. Steen (eds.). *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*. John Benjamins.
Stibbe, A. (1997). <Reinforcement and activation of metaphor in discourse>, *South African Journal of Linguistics*, 15, 3, 86-91.
Sweetser, E. EVF. (1993). *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Ungerer, Friedrich. & Schmid, Hans-Jörg. (1996). *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*, London.

BDD-A3071 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 23:55:36 UTC)