

Relevance-based Approach to Metonymy and Metaphor

Nam-sun SONG (宋 南先)

1. Introduction

There seems to have been a naive question in the study of metaphor and other tropes of speech, i.e. whether it is to be located within the study of language, or if so, where to locate it. Are metaphor and other tropes of speech some exceptional or supplementary use of language whose study is to be tackled only after a serious study of 'normal' language use, or are they an integrated part of the study of language use and even an essential one? The answer to this question vary from scholar to scholar. This variation of views leads to different approaches to interpretation of metaphor. '... metaphor means what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more.' (Davidson 1978 in Martinich: 430) For Kittay (1987: 144) metaphors are interpreted as the second-order meaning which is 'obtained when features of the utterance and its context indicate to the hearer or reader that the first-order meaning of the expression is either unavailable or is not appropriate...' Grice (1975) and Searle (1979) claim that hearers interpret an utterance metaphorically only if he finds the literal interpretation 'flouted the first maxim of Quality' (Grice 1975 in Martinich: 156) or the literal interpretation turns out 'radically defective' (Searle 1979 in Martinich: 422).

What is shared by Kittay (1987), Grice (1975) and Searle (1979) is an assumption that there is a clear-cut distinction between the literal interpretation and the metaphorical interpretation of an utterance, and the

metaphorical interpretation presupposes the literal interpretation and its rejection. This assumption will be rejected by outlining the approach to metaphor illustrated by Sperber and Wilson (1986). It will also be shown that their analysis of metaphor cannot be adequate enough lacking an explicit account of the role of metaphor. A possibility that their proposal could be enriched will be sketched according to the study of the nature of metaphor and human conceptual structures suggested by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Lakoff (1987).

2. Metaphor as the secondary reading

Grice (1975) suggests that metaphors are floutings or exploitations of maxims of Quality. Example (1) involves categorial falsity.

(1) Sam is a pig.

The literal interpretation of this sentence is anomalous because it contradicts the standard Quality implicature that one believes what one asserts. More likely supposition the hearer may hold is that the speaker is trying to attribute to Sam some feature or features in respect of which Sam resembles a pig. Grice thus offers some account of how a metaphoric interpretation is triggered but it contributes little to understanding how metaphors are interpreted.

Searle (1979) is an attempt to elaborate Grice's approach to metaphors. He claims that, in literal utterance, literal sentence meaning and speaker's utterance meaning are the same while they are not identical in metaphoric utterance. Where an utterance is defective if taken literally, the hearer looks for an utterance meaning different from sentence meaning by virtue of the notion of 'similarity'. When 'S is P' is stated and assigning the literal value of P results in a defective interpretation, the hearer searches some other possible value R similar to the literal value of P. The searching strategy

which is lacking in Grice (1975) is accounted for in terms of several principles exemplified below.

Principle 1

Things which are P are by definition R. Usually, if the metaphor works, R will be one of the salient defining characteristics of P.

Principle 2

Things which are P are contingently R. If the metaphor works, the property R should be salient or well known property of P things.

Given Principle 1, example (2a) is construed to mean (2b) because giants are by definition big.

- (2) a. Sam is a giant.
b. Sam is big.

Similarly, given Principle 2, example (1) is taken to mean (3).

- (3) Sam is filthy, gluttonous, sloppy, and so on.

An overall consideration of suggestions made by Grice and Searle gives rise to several questions. As pointed out earlier, Grice and Searle start their argument taking for granted that literal and metaphorical interpretations are clearly distinct from each other. However, given the examples in (4), Levinson (1983: 150) quite plausibly asked where literal interpretation ceases and metaphorical interpretation takes over.

- (4) John came hurriedly down the stairs.
John ran down the stairs.
John rushed down the stairs.
John hustled down the stairs.
John shot down the stairs.

John whistled down the stairs.

It will vary from person to person how many metaphors he can pick out of the following examples from Lackoff and Johnson (1980: 7).

(5) You're wasting my time.

This gadget will save you hours.

I don't have the time to give you.

How do you spend your time these days?

That flat tire cost me an hour.

I've invested a lot of time in her.

I don't have enough time to spare for that.

You're running out of time.

You need to budget your time.

Put aside some time for ping pong.

Is that worth your while?

Do you have much time left?

He's living on borrowed time.

You don't use your time profitably.

I lost a lot of time when I got sick.

Thank you for your time.

It is self-evident that any hypothesis based on rules or principles conditions for whose application are not constant cannot be seen to be adequate.

The second question follows. Does processing of utterances always start with their literal interpretations? Obviously, obscurity between literal and metaphoric utterances make this assumption untenable. Another related question is whether processing of utterance involves choosing one set of interpretations from an exhaustive list of possible interpretations? Is it not too much burdening us in our daily life? The following remarks by Sperber

and Wilson (1986) sounds more plausible, at least intuitively.

If someone says 'I'm exhausted', there is no point in quibbling over whether exhausted is exactly what she is: (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 234)

I should be noted that a kind of rhetoric is employed when Searle (1979 in Martinich 1990: 422) says 'Where the utterance is defective if taken literally, *look for* an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning.' Why do you bother to look for the next one and with what perspective and strategy? No explicit answer is given.

The last question is whether accounting for metaphor appealing to the notion of similarity is adequate and always possible? The answer is 'no.' Neither Principle 1 nor Principle 2 mentioned above cannot account for relation between P and R in (6).

(6) Ideas are food.

Any objective similarity can hardly be recognised between 'idea' and 'food'. In such a case, Searle holds that similarity is the fact about our sensibility, whether culturally or naturally determined. Both can be digested, swallowed, devoured, warmed over, etc. However, Lackof & Johnson (1980: 148) points out that what makes similarity is the metaphor itself. The concept of swallowing food is independent of the metaphor, but swallowing ideas cannot be a concept without the metaphor.

In the following section, we will outline the approach to metaphor within the framework of relevance theory illustrated by Sperber & Wilson to see if it can provide the answers to those questions.

3. Metaphor and relevance

Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1992) explain human communication appealing to the notion of 'relevance'. The notion of relevance is characterised in terms

of effect and effort. Communication involves process that some mental effort achieves some contextual effect in terms of alterations to the individual's beliefs: the addition of contextual implications, the cancellation of existing assumptions, or the strengthening of existing assumptions. Thus the notion of relevance is defined as follows:

Relevance

- (a) Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.
- (b) Other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who processes it. (Sperber & Wilson 1992)

To communicate is to convey a presumption of relevance: in other words, to imply that the utterance is worth the audience's attention. This is called *the principle of relevance*.

In the theory of relevance, any utterance can be used in two ways: 'descriptively' and 'interpretively.' Descriptive use of utterance represents some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form while interpretive use of utterance represents a thought in virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms. It is also assumed that every utterance is used to represent a thought of the speaker's. Then, an utterance is strictly 'literal' if it has the same propositional form as the speaker's thought, while an utterance is less than strictly literal if its propositional form and the speaker's thought somewhat resemble, i.e. if they share some logical properties, not all. Note that literalness is defined not as a norm from which one must always depart but as a limiting case. Literalness and non-literalness is no more a question of distinction but of continuity. Then, interpretation of an utterance is not a business like 'keep the norm first, and

if you fail, do something else.' Therefore, any *ad hoc* rules or principles does not need to be adduced.

In Sperber & Wilson (1986), literal and non-literal interpretations are both accounted for in virtue of a single principle, i.e. the principle of relevance. The hearer should take an utterance as strictly literal only when nothing than strict literality confirms the presumption of relevance. Otherwise, some looseness is taken for granted in general. Sperber & Wilson (1986: 234) say:

For example, if someone says, 'It's 5 p.m.', she should not be taken to task if it turns out to be five minutes or two minutes to, unless the relevance of the utterance depends on that kind of exactitude.

Supposing any transgression of a norm or a maxim is quite counter-intuitive. What enables the hearer to draw the relevant interpretation here is not recognition of any kind of violation of the norm but a presumption that the speaker must have thought the utterance would have enough effect to be worth his attention and the intended effect could be obtained without any gratuitous effort. In other words, according to relevance theory, the very first interpretation obtained by the hearer is the relevant interpretation of the utterance. If not so, the communication just failed. Thus we do not need any rhetoric like Searls's saying 'When the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning' by which the hearer is simply pushed ahead without any presumption given.

In the theory of relevance, metaphor and a variety of related tropes like hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche are characterised as a kind of loose talking. Both in loose talking and metaphor, the propositional form of an utterance and the propositional form of speaker's thought are not identical, but 'resemble', i.e. they share some, but not all, logical properties. When

you are asked the time in daily circumstances where one is not required to behave with high exactitude, he may say 'Its 5 p.m.'. It is the search for optimal relevance that leads the speaker to choose less faithful but more economical interpretation of his thought. then, the hearer, also in virtue of presumption of relevance, recognises that she is being offered less literal interpretation of his thought.

Similarly, suppose a situation in which you are shocked to see John's room very filthy and untidy to the extent that you cannot stand, and say (7) to John.

(7) This room is pigsty.

This conventional metaphor gives John easy access to an encyclopaedic-schema with some dominant assumptions like (8).

(8) Pigsties are filthy and untidy.

Given the presumption of relevance, John draws the implication that the room is filthy and untidy. Expectation of relevance makes John search for more implications without which the use of metaphor can not be justified, e.g. filthness and untidiness are beyond the norm, you are blaming him for filthness and untidiness of his room, etc.

Metaphor thus requires no special interpretative abilities or procedure: it is a natural outcome of some very general abilities and procedures used in verbal communication. (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 237)

The approach to metaphor suggested by Sperber and Wilson is superior to ealier pragmatic approaches to metaphor since it provides more generalised account of interpretation of metaphor as well as that of literal utterances without appealing to a conventioal distinction between literal utterances and metaphors, or norms and principles based on the distinction which have

no empirical evidence.

4. Metonymy and metaphor

In this section, the relevance-based approach is applied to some more examples of metonymy and metaphor to observe their roles and functions in verbal communication, taking the suggestions made by Lackoff and Johnson (1980) and Lackoff (1987).

According to Lakoff (1980: 36), let us defined metonymy thus: a way of using one entity to refer to another that is related to it. Here is one example raised by Lakoff (1980: 35).

(9) The ham sandwich is waiting for his check.

In this case, the ham sandwich is being used to refer to a person related to it, i.e. the person who ordered it. Here again, what enables the hearer to realise indirectness of the utterance and draw an implication (10) is not the defectiveness of the literal interpretation itself but the presumption of relevance.

(10) The man who ordered a ham sandwich is waiting for his check.

A rational speaker who wants communicate an assumption (10) may think that the literal representation of (10) is too complex to express in a given situation. At the same time, he knows that the assumption (10) can straightforwardly be derived from an simpler expression (9) though it has some unnecessary implications he does not want to communicate. Given the principle of relevance, his choise will be (9) since he may think that the hearer, led by the presumption of relevance, would sort out the unnecessary implications and derive (10) straightforwardly in virtue of the relation between a ham sandwich and the man.

See the Japanese metonymic expressions in (11).

- (11) a. konogoro kuruma-ni notte-inai
recently car-loc ride-be not
(I have not ridden in a car recently.)
(I have not driven a car recently.)
- b. konogoro handoru-wo nigitte-inai
recently steering wheel-acc hold-be not
(I have not held a steering wheel recently,)
(I have not driven a car recently)

Given a context, these two utterances may have the same implication, 'I have not driven a car recently.' In either case, an action or an event is used to refer to another action or event related to it. However, they differ in their distributions in discourses. For instance, they exhibit difference in their degree of acceptability when they are followed by (12a,b,).

- (12) a. nomu-kikai-ga ookute
drink-occasion-nom many-since
(since I have many occasions to drink.)
- b. nichu-ga itsumo konde-te
road-nom always be crowded-since
(since traffic is always heavy.)

The utterance (11a) makes a natural discourse in combination either with (12a) and (12b) while combination of (11b) and (12b) is slightly less natural. The difference gets clearer in (13) and (14).

- (13) a. non-dara hanndoru-wo nigiru-na
drink-if steering wheel-acc hold-don't
(Don't drink and drive.)
- b. non-dara kuruma-ni noru-na
drink-if car-loc ride-don't

(Don't drink and drive.)

- (14) a.? hanndoru-wo nigitte gakkoo-ni itta
 steering wheel-acc hold-and school-loc went
 (I drove to school.)
- b. kuruma-ni notte gakkoo-ni itta
 car-loc ride-and school-loc went
 (I drove to school.)

These examples show that 'kurumani noru' (ride in a car) metonymy has wider distribution and can always substitute the literal expression 'kurumawo untensuru' (drive a car) while 'handoruwo nigiru' (hold a steering wheel) metonymy has much more limited distribution. The distribution of hold-a-steering-wheel metonymy implies that it can substitute the literal expression only when some aspect of the action of driving a car is focused or highlighted, i.e. *controlling a car with ability enough to do so*. It seems plausible to assume that (13a), in virtue of use of the metonymy, has an implication, 'If you drink, you lose your ability to control a car.'

The difference manifest between hold-a-steering-wheel metonymy and ride-in-a-car metonymy is attributed to the fact that in the former is based on the part-for-the-whole relation, i.e. *synecdoche* in a traditional term while the latter is not. When a metonymy is based on this relation, it highlights an aspect or a set of aspects of an action or an event in question which are relevant to the function of the part in its relation to the whole. In other words, this type of metonymy has its own connotational penumbra relatively independent of the context. This idea about metonymy is never original. Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 37) say that metonymy 'allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to.' When one says 'There are a lot of good heads.', he is using the part not just to refer to the whole, but rather to refer to a particular characteristic of the

whole, i.e. intelligence.

Thus, metonymy cannot be regarded merely as a kind of loose talking: it has more inherent function in verbal communication. On the effect side, it may, in virtue of its inherent connotational penumbra, be a constant choice by a rational speaker to focus certain aspects of an action or an event, and, on the effort side, it limits the range of possible implications and thus serves to reduce the processing efforts.

Now I return to the last question raised in section 1. the question about the similarity. When one is addressed the utterance (15), it is quite automatic for him to derive the implication (16).

(15) John budgets his time.

(16) John is a careful user of time.

The presence of the linguistic form 'budgets' and 'time' give the hearer an access to each encyclopaedic schema with a set of assumptions. However, in Sperber & Wilson (1986) no explicit answer is given to the question how do they get correlated. In other words, How can the hearer choose a set of assumptions to yield an assumption like 'time is something for use'? Obviously, there is no objective ground that makes it possible. Time just goes, flies, passes, etc. Even these assumptions are highly metaphorical. The only answer that sounds plausible seems to be saying that what enables the hearer to choose a set of assumptions to yield (16) is a metaphoric conceptual system in which time is conceived of as a valuable commodity, a limited resource. Thus, *time is money* metaphor focuses time's property of limitedness and hides its property of infinitude. In this respect, metaphor functions to limit the range of possible implications and thereby serves to reduce the hearer's efforts to process the utterance.

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