METAPHORS

Metaphor is Not a Dirty Word

Crudely split, the academy divides into those who are primarily interested in *what* we are saying, and those who are concerned with *how* we are saying it.[1] For the first party, language is a vehicle for meaning that doesn't demand further scrutiny. To them, language stands to meaning in a similar relation as a letter to its envelope. The people on the other side think that language stands in no such direct relation to meaning. They think that language is an at best problematic housing for meaning, infested with parasitic meanings, meanings that have been secreted in the language, smuggled in. Importantly, they think that it is not always possible to separate these free-loading stowaway meanings from the intended, fare-paying meanings.

Those for whom language is of intrinsic interest think that these other meanings can affect how we think of the relations between two processes or systems, or between ourselves and the world. They point to the influential work conducted on cognitive metaphor by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who point out that metaphor is a figure of speech that invades almost every communicative act (even this sentence). Their so-called cognitive metaphors include the orientational metaphors, which are concerned with up, down, high, low, and so on; and the conduit metaphors, which are used when something that doesn't (in any literal sense, over physical distance) travel or move is said to move. Lakoff and Johnson are not being prescriptive about metaphor. These are not limiting comments, telling us how we should use language, but are intended to represent the ways in which we actually do use language.

Aside from being a matter of some curiosity to linguists, why bother? Why is this work interesting to anyone outside the field? The idea is that there are important consequences – political, social, economic – arising from our choice of metaphorical field; although to say "choice" is a little disingenuous, as it implies that we can select a metaphor that suits us. One of the points of Lakoff and Johnson's work is that the selection of a particular cognitive metaphor is rarely a conscious procedure. Thinking about metaphors reminds us of the properties things have versus the properties they do not. In this respect, metaphorical descriptions are attributions, a little like what philosophers sometimes call "secondary qualities" – those properties, such as colour, or taste, or smell, which express the

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[1] Additionally, both parties use images, in the form of charts, maps, diagrams, schematics, illustrations, and so on; but *how* they use these images is very different. Again, there is a division between being (primarily) interested in content and being (primarily) interested in form or frame. One side takes a functional and pragmatic approach to the image as an efficient method of storing large quantities information, and the other takes an aesthetic approach which holds the image to be intrinsically interesting.

way we understand the world. Is a cognitive metaphor like a secondary quality? Lakoff and Johnson seem to think it might be, at least insofar as if it is illusory, it is a persistent illusion, and we cannot work without it.

Not everyone agrees. As an application of Lakoff and Johnson's work, psychotherapist David Grove has invented a system based on using what he calls "clean-language." This involves drawing the patient's attention to the metaphors they use in thinking about their problems, and from here, to the use of a cleaner vocabulary, stripped of these metaphorical components. It's fair to say that most professional linguists would be a little pessimistic about Grove's work. "Clean" is being used metaphorically, and this is indicative: our conceptual apparatus is inherently metaphorical, there's no getting away from it (even with therapy). Metaphor is a not bad thing, anymore than colour is, and despite Grove's hopes, there is no clean language. If we think of metaphors as being like secondary qualities, then we can understand, to some extent, their usefulness. We should no more aim for a "clean" language than we should aim for an achromatic account of visual perception. Recognising the metaphorical content of our language is not a first step to purging language of its metaphorical content, nor is it an admission that we are using the wrong language, and should revert to a literal description: there is often no literal sense we could substitute for the metaphor. In such cases, the metaphorical description becomes the de facto literal description.

This brings us to the problem of overstating the case for metaphor, for there are also cases where the language looks metaphorical, but is not. "The mind is a machine" is one such case. If we think of machines as steam driven motors with cogs and cams and gears, then the relation with mind is obviously metaphorical. But machines have changed, and so too has our understanding of the mind. The mind is not much like a steam engine, or the movement of a watch, but it might be very much like the workings of a computer, and if we are willing draw a continuum between clock movements, steam engines, and silicon chips, then mind is like (some types of) machine. So when a certain scientist says, "the mind is a machine," that is not necessarily a metaphor. She is trying to explain to us that she really thinks that the mind should be understood as machines like clocks and steam engines and computers are understood (in terms of the causal relations that hold between components, and so on). She will argue that it is a very complex machine, but that this does not mean it is not a machine.

Hypersensitivity to metaphorical language can result in serious interpretative errors, and this occurs with some regularity when rhetoricians and literary critics turn their attention to scientific texts. Literary critics are trained to detect and account for metaphorical language, but they are also conditioned to attribute significance to it. It is not, of course, either impossible or invalid to read a scientific text as if it were a literary text, but to do so is to deliberately ignore all but the aesthetic features, and it is surely invalid to infer from this possibility that the scientific text is therefore of the same epistemological status as a literary text. That is, a map is not only an abstract composition; with the addition of a key, it is also a

map. By apparently failing to recognise this distinction, such approaches often miss something important about the limitations of the literary approach to scientific writing. The following extract from Gillian Beer underlines these concerns:

> That [chaos theory] has developed alongside deconstruction, with its refusal of parameters of interpretation, its obdurate relativism, is as intriguing as is the rediscovery of plate-tectonics at the height of the fashion for Derridean epistemology, with its emphasis on un-grounding. Are such analogies just a play of words? I do not believe so. (1996: 194)

Her answer to that last question is where we should begin to stop listening. What Beer is doing is bringing the type of interpretative skills quite valid within her own discipline of literary study and treating scientific work as if it could be evaluated or even sensibly discussed in such terms. "Un-grounding" means quite different things in each case. Tectonic plate movement is not a metaphor. Geophysicists call the sections of crust "plates" because they are flat sheets (dinner plates being, of course, only an instance of this broader definition of a plate). The movement is because the plates move. This is not a metaphor. There is no language play here. There are plates, albeit big ones, and they are moving around, albeit only very slowly and very slightly. These are matters of empirical fact. Why, then, do we have Gillian Beer pondering the metaphorical content of plate tectonics? In a sense, she is looking at the map without the key.

So metaphorical language is more common than we think and more influential than we think, but a metaphor in literary fiction is a very different thing to a cognitive metaphor. Metaphors are not always optional, inasmuch as the language may await the terminology to offer a literal description. Similarly, apparent metaphors may in fact be literal descriptions, and so how we decide on whether a sense is being metaphorical or not may depend on what we are willing to include in the extension of a particular term. Finally, the option of reading metaphorically does not exclude literal readings.

With these caveats in mind, what can we do with metaphors that cannot do without them? As if to underline the pervasiveness of metaphor, it should be apparent now that this project is predicated on a cognitive metaphor. It assumes the "movement" of facts. And, as Simon Blackburn points out with regard to "facing the facts,"

> facing the facts is literally nonsense: we can face the Eiffel Tower, but facts are not things with a place. (If they were, as Wittgenstein remarked, we could move them; but while you could move the Eiffel Tower to Berlin, you cannot move the fact that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris anywhere at all.) (2001)

The project title – "How Well Do 'Facts' Travel?" – invites us to think of facts as things that move between places, as a boat moves between two shores, or else as flotsam and jetsam. But in a sense nothing "moves" at all, and it is equally valid to invert the image to one which

conceptualises facts as static points with fixed location, towards which disciplines approach, upon which they converge. Lakoff himself makes the case that "facts are points":

    1 The theory touches on those points.

    2 You have to take into account the way the facts are laid out.

That is, facts are particulate; they have a spatial location but perhaps do not themselves occupy space – even a book "packed with facts" is not filled by the facts. It certainly seems true that a fact is roughly atomic or molecular with respect to knowledge. Unfortunately for those who would like to be rid of metaphorical talk, it does seem to be the case that it is almost impossible to think of facts without employing some or other metaphorical expression. The question is whether it matters which ones we use.

So there are several things to think about with regard to the metaphors being used here. One is how we think of "facts": is a fact particulate and discrete, like grains or atoms? Or is it fluid? Does information "flow"? If so, how? Is it carried? Secondly, there is the issue of movement: do the facts move between the disciplines (or sites of use), or do the disciplines move and grow to extend over the facts? If we use a fluid model, there is the realm of hydraulics: of flow regulated by valve- or filter-metaphors, which allow some facts to pass and not others. Likewise, there are metaphors of resistance.

Exhausting the options isn't the purpose here. And it might be the case that you are in the camp that thinks that the language we use is really not all that important. But even those who think there's nothing useful about metaphorical language will at least be more aware of it. How we think of the motion of these facts will to some extent determine or be determined by how we think of the facts. Motion can be either active or passive, and either positive or negative. It might be possible to array these various senses on a matrix with axes that measured passivity to activity against positivity to negativity. Whether or not this would be useful is difficult to predict.

Another dimension is the sense of use and misuse, and this is often expressed in terms of trade, of deficit and gain, import and export – sometimes in the sense of smuggling, sometimes in the sense of quarantine, where a foreign fact is held separate from native facts. This makes us think of territorial proprietary. It also invokes notions of legitimacy, and draws attention to the site of production versus the site of consumption. It implies "borders" beyond which a fact is welcome or unwelcome. It implies theft, and recalls the idea of "intellectual property."

There are organic metaphors, which include those taken from medicine or horticulture: the transplantation of fact, the seeding of facts in new ground. From one metaphor, other senses proliferate, depending upon how far you want to go. A transplant might be rejected, it may have been donated or farmed. Would those who received the fact use a different metaphor from those who initially produced it?

If language games don't appeal, a third category is information theory. This occupies an ambiguous zone between the literal and the metaphorical, inasmuch as information theory posits "information" as a means of expressing the level of organisation possessed by a system, a force counter to entropy. By making it something measurable, information is naturalised. Information is a property that can be expressed as a reduction in entropy. If we think of facts in terms of information, then we have access to the language of information theory. Information theory talks of senders, receivers, messages, content. It talks of distortion and noise. Some information theorists claim that you can even measure surprise, expressing it in terms of the probability of a particular event occurring.

What relation holds between facts and information? Information, in the mathematical sense, is not concerned with epistemology. There is no relation between information and truth. Information is just about organisation. Would employing the language of information theory to describe the transit of facts perform a similar function as employing the language of computing did for the materialist theory of mind? In other words, if facts were information and information literally flows, would a fact literally move?

Works cited

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