

DENYING THE UNDENIABLE METAPHORS ARE NOT COMPARISONS

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Assertions which are undeniable are often dead ends in an investigation. So it is with the assertion that metaphors are comparisons, a continually recurring claim and, to some extent, undeniable. To the extent that we accept that assertion, it neither explains what metaphors are nor contributes toward an explanation. We will do better not to be satisfied with calling metaphors comparisons, even at the risk of paradoxically denying the undeniable.

Let us look at metaphoring as comparing. Every (live) metaphor, when uttered, presents the hearer or reader first of all with a "stop sign" because it is either false ('George is an ostrich' when George is a person) or sortally incorrect (i.e., contains semantically incompatible lexical items 'The bicycle objected to the hill') or irrelevant in context (proverbial metaphors 'It is difficult to transplant mature trees' when the topic is compelling old people to move from their homes)

Since the goal of verbal communication is to understand and to be understood, the hearer assumes the speaker intends to speak meaningfully, to say what he believes to be true or otherwise worth saying, to speak on the topic or to give cues for changing it, and so on. These are essential background conventions of all language use.

Therefore, the hearer looks for a way to understand a metaphorical utterance which is unacceptable on a standard interpretation. The comparison view of metaphor is such a way. Metaphors are held to be implicit comparisons of obviously unlike things that nevertheless have something in common. There is a likeness that can be salvaged from the comparison of such unlike things as George and ostriches, bicycles and objecting things. The similarity does not reside in the dissimilarity, as has sometimes been said, but in the things which are so conspicuously dissimilar ¹

'Comparison' is ambiguous: it is both an act of comparing and a result of comparing. The comparison view of metaphor stresses the result. based on an act of comparing, a metaphor can be reconstructed as an assertion that there is a likeness (or similarity or resemblance) between the things referred to by the metaphorical utterance. Or as an assertion that there is an analogy--a similar relationship to other things --between the things referred to.

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What can be said in favor of this view? The claim that the act of comparing is involved in understanding metaphors is the grain of truth in this theory that I cannot possibly deny.

Comparing is probably the most basic cognitive activity. Let us define it as the putting together of two numerically distinct things and determining what is similar and dissimilar between them. It depends on the ability which we all have to judge relative similarity. Comparing has enormous scope. It ranges from the scrutiny needed to tell an original painting from a good forgery to being momentarily struck by a resemblance between two people. Almost everything we do in using our senses or our reason involves comparing. We cannot correctly apply any word literally without evaluating the similarities and dissimilarities in a given situation since no two situations are identical.² Comparing is a fortiori involved in understanding metaphors since it is so universally involved in everything we do. This is not much of a triumph for the comparison theory of metaphor

One reason why such a nonexplanatory explanation has been advanced is that metaphor is that trope which is not one of the more narrowly defined tropes, such as synecdoche, oxymoron, periphrasis, personification, and so on. Its function is thus residual. it does whatever the other tropes do not specifically do. Or to the modern student, unaware of the variety of

figures of speech, metaphor is highly general. It is figurative language. In either case, as left-over or all-encompassing, only something as universal as comparison seems to fit.

The claim that metaphors can be reconstructed as assertions of likeness between unlike things gets its main support from some examples of metaphors. These are metaphors of the "copula link" form³ 'A is B', where A and B are general terms denoting objects, such as 'Man is a wolf'. For metaphors of this form whose constituent terms have highly determinate senses and highly conventionalized associations, 'A is B' can be reconstructed as 'A is like B' (with the proviso that we all know what As and Bs are)

This doesn't work for all As and Bs in the 'A is B' form. 'Geraniums are doorbells' and 'A child is a file folder' do not lend intuitive support to the comparison theory. Neither do metaphors of other syntactic forms. 'The perfume lurked in the vial' or 'He studied the thesis of the salad with care'. Assertions of likeness or of analogy at least cannot immediately be reconstructed from these metaphors

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But we do not have to survey examples of metaphors to find problems with the comparison theory. Stating likenesses found by comparing is different from uttering a metaphor or even a simile. This is the difference between asserting and what has been called metaphorizing. It is a difference of function in communication and, as a result, of truth-value. I will not elaborate on this here.⁴ In passing, I ask you only to consider the differences between denying, proving or doubting assertions of likeness, such as 'This desk is like the one you saw in the store window yesterday,' and metaphors or similes.

I want to discuss the dilemma that arises from treating metaphors as comparisons. Open comparison-- simply converting the metaphor to an 'A is like B'

statement--is uninformative, 'closed' comparison--'A is like B in such and such ways'--is more determinate than the metaphor it replaces.

Why is open comparison uninformative?⁵

1. Likeness is a matter of degree. Any two shades of red, for example, are like each other in a context of non-reds, but each is more like another shade of red than like the other. The likeness of any two things depends on the context in which they are compared, it is not absolute.

2. Likeness between things (not perhaps between some simple properties) is likeness in some but not in all respects. A toy wagon is like a car in having four wheels but not like it with respect to size or weight. The wagon may be like a play table in size and perhaps like a balloon in color, and so on.

3. The respects, or aspects, of any thing are exceedingly numerous. There are still many more manifest, dispositional and relational properties of the toy wagon that could be a source of likenesses between it and other things.

From 1. and 2. it follows that likeness is a nontransitive relation. We cannot infer from the statements that A is like B and that B is like C, that A is like C, nor that A is not like C.

From 2. and 3. it follows that any two things can be seen as like each other in some respects. It may take imagination in some cases, but it is possible

Therefore, to say simply that A is like B, where we mean 'in some way', is uninformative because that is true of any A and B whatsoever.

The emptiness of open comparison may not be obvious because we so often use it successfully for practical ends. When something is like another thing in most of its salient respects and to a high degree in context, we can informatively compare them. Someone who doesn't

know what a loveseat is gets some information by being told that loveseats are like sofas. Someone who knows Jane but not Jean gets some information by being told that Jean is like Jane. Without the qualifications of most of the salient respects and a high degree of likeness, comparisons can be useful but need to be extended with further explanations, examples and pointings out. Furthermore, which respects are salient is, at least to some extent, culture- or subculture-dependent.⁶ The photograph or the mirror image are for us clearly like what is photographed or reflected, but not for someone who has not learned the conventions of photographic or reflected likeness. Even in informal use, open comparison readily drifts into 'closed' comparison.

A 'closed' comparison is an assertion of likeness between two things, giving the respects in which they are held to be like each other. This is informative, but when it is applied to metaphor, it requires information to be supplied which is not given in the metaphor. When that information is supplied, the comparison is more determinate than the metaphor.

A statement of likeness in specified respects cannot paraphrase a metaphor because the information contents of paraphrase and metaphor are different.⁷ The metaphor does not mention or imply those respects which are mentioned in the 'closed' comparison.

Most students of metaphor agree that metaphors are not uniquely interpretable. Different interpretations of one metaphor are common and acceptable. But if metaphors are held to be paraphrasable as 'closed' comparisons, then there will be different nonequivalent paraphrases for one metaphor. This is not what we usually mean by paraphrase.

Still another objection is that the use of metaphors is unmotivated on this account. If metaphors can be paraphrased as 'closed' comparisons, how much clearer to use a 'closed' comparison than a metaphor. Metaphors are nothing but a more "decorative" way to say what can be said in other, less troublesome words.

This view is generally discredited at the present time, as it deserves to be. Metaphors are used because they have heuristic value in revising our outlook on the world. This revision is sometimes momentary but sometimes lasting. A metaphor has the potential to continue generating conceptual revisions well beyond the context of its utterance. However, once a metaphor is frozen as a particular 'closed' comparison, its heuristic value is minimized, if not eliminated.⁸

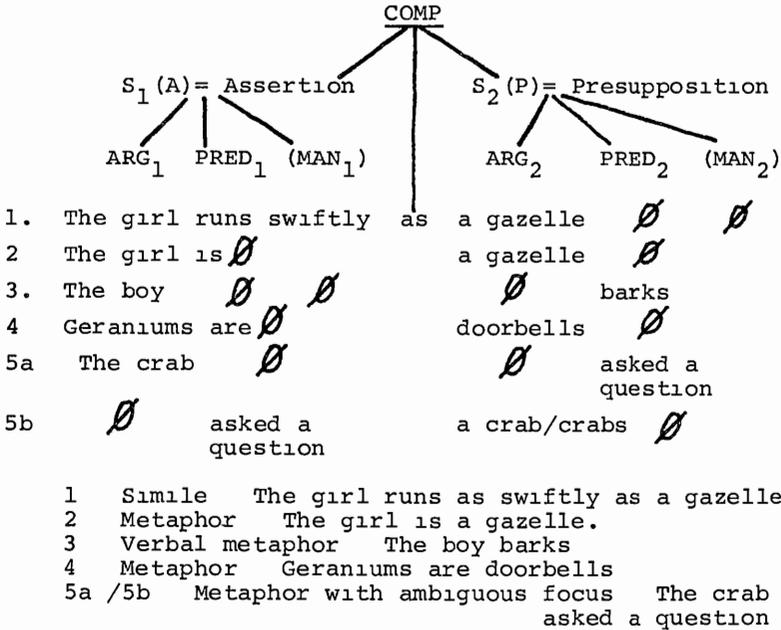
The view that metaphors are 'closed' comparisons may mean something other than that they are paraphrasable as comparisons. Perhaps a hearer, in order to understand a metaphor, reconstructs it as a 'closed' comparison. Perhaps a speaker, in order to produce a metaphor, first constructs it as a 'closed' comparison. These 'closed' comparisons would not be available as paraphrases; they would be steps in the encoding-decoding process. They could quite understandably be different for different speaker-hearers interpreting the same metaphor.

Such a view is represented by Dorothy Mack's article, "Metaphoring as Speech Act,"⁹ in which she tries to show that both metaphors and similes have the same deep structure, namely a 'closed' comparison between an assertion and a presupposition. She grants that metaphors (with the exception of dead metaphors) are not paraphrasable and also that metaphors have "multiple meanings".¹⁰ She characterizes metaphors as "highly deleted elliptical constructions"¹¹ of, one must add, highly specific 'closed' comparisons of a single form. This is how it looks.

[See Fig 1, next page]

I question whether this is a legitimate use of a deletion operation. The deleted lexical items are not recoverable from the surface string, except in the simile, sentence #1.¹² The deep structure shows additions made to the surface string in the process of giving the metaphor an interpretation. I see no reason to call this a syntactic operation.

Fig 1



The difference between the simile in #1. and the metaphor in #2 reveals one difficulty with this form. Let us agree that 'Gazelles run swiftly' is a presupposition of the use of 'gazelle' in these utterances,¹³ but surely it is not the only one. Gazelles are also delicate, graceful and soft-eyed. It may well be that a metaphorical identification of a girl and a gazelle calls for all of these presuppositions to enter into the interpretation of the utterance.¹⁴ It may be that all of them are involved, but not all with equal weight, so that the predicate of the presupposition cannot be represented as a conjunction.

It seems, in fact, that the choice of the relevant presupposition or presuppositions depends on the content of what Mack calls the assertion. These are not independent of each other. I believe that different presuppositions of 'pour' will be invoked for

The coal poured down the chute.

The crowd poured out of the theater.

She was poured into that dress.

And this seems merely an awkward way of saying that 'pour' is to some degree reinterpreted by its role in particular metaphors.¹⁵ However, if this is so, we are not noting established likenesses between things but rather selecting likenesses (from the indefinitely many possible) to fit the total context. The very broad umbrella of 'comparing' covers this procedure but explains no more about it than calling it metaphorical reinterpretation.¹⁶

That every metaphor contains an assertion, and yet is not an assertion, is another doubtful claim to me. I suspect that most metaphors contain, at best, a very defective assertion. In 'The boy barks' and 'Geraniums are doorbells' the assertions would be something like 'The boy does something' and 'Geraniums are such'. In 'He was overtaken in the race for my good judgment,' I don't know how to rescue a nonmetaphorical assertion.

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In conclusion, I have tried to show that the claim that metaphors are comparisons is vacuous if open comparison is meant. The claim that metaphors can be paraphrased as 'closed' comparisons is false because the paraphrase must include information not given in the metaphor. The claim that metaphors are constructed or reconstructed as 'closed' comparisons at the level of deep structure provides too rigid a pattern and demands too much of deep structure.¹⁷ The recommended procedure has technical problems because it provides for deletions not restricted by recoverability

conditions. The pattern does not comfortably fit many different forms of metaphors. And I cannot see that this machinery contributes anything more precise to the following sketch: speakers usually understand even new metaphors by giving them an interpretation which is nonstandard and which uses components of the senses of the lexical items as well as what is known about the referents of those items and about the context of utterance.

If that is vague as a single explanation, it is because a single explanation that can be expressed in a single sentence cannot say much about as complex a phenomenon as metaphor. And that is what is wrong with saying that metaphors are comparisons.

NOTES

¹Burrell, among many others, slips into this way of talking, even though he has it right when quoting Aristotle. Cf. Burrell 1973, pp. 72, 242-3.

²Hesse 1966, pp. 152-3, pp. 11-2.

³Brooke-Rose 1958, a term from her typology.

⁴See Loewenberg 1975 a.

⁵Goodman 1960, 1968, 1970, Greenlee 1968.

⁶One might ask a radical relativist who follows Goodman whether some aspects of things are not indeed universally salient. Quine gives with one hand and takes away with the other. Language could not be learned, nor experience learned from, without "an innate standard of similarity: our animal birthright." But this does not secure the reference to objects which proves to be "behaviorally inscrutable." Quine 1969, p. 123, 35. Lewis 1969, p. 38, insists that "we happen uniformly to notice some analogies and ignore others." I am grateful to Edward Becker for raising this as yet unsettled question.

⁷Swanson 1961.

⁸Warner 1973, pp. 371-2.

⁹Mack 1975.

¹⁰Mack 1975, pp. 235, 236, 242.

¹¹Mack 1975, p. 240.

¹²Chomsky 1965, p. 177.

¹³It is unclear why this information invariably takes the form of a presupposition. I prefer to use 'presupposition' more narrowly than Mack apparently does. Although metaphors can be based on private or esoteric knowledge, they usually are based on knowledge widely shared in a speech community. This knowledge is by no means always definitional. See Loewenberg 1975 b, and for some examples, Loewenberg 1975 a, pp. 328-9.

¹⁴Mack 1975, p. 236, recognizes this, but the pattern provided does not accommodate it readily.

¹⁵Mack 1975, pp. 226, 227, 236, acknowledges that reinterpretation is involved. The example, 'I married my albatross,' was brought up in discussion with a question of whether 'marry' is reinterpreted in the utterance of this sentence. I think it clearly is. This is a double metaphor. 'albatross' is a dead-metaphorical word with quite a determinate sense. To 'marry' (metaphorically) one's (metaphorical) albatross involves the selection of some features of 'marry' (e.g., to commit oneself to a long term relationship, to live with, etc.) but surely not all (e.g., to intend to have little albatrosses or at least consummate the relationship).

¹⁶Mack 1975, p. 234, favorably compares her approach with those of Wheelwright, Black, Weinreich and Brooke-Rose. She charges that they foster the "misconception that metaphor operates in some special, almost mystical fashion."

¹⁷My intuition on this latter point was confirmed by Larry W Martin and W K. Percival

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