01.
Reassessing the All-Pervasiveness Assumption of Metaphors

Unlike the traditional view of metaphor according to which metaphors are an anomalous phenomenon in language and thought, usually ascribed to Aristotle and prevailing over centuries in mainstream philosophical reflections on language, in the late 20th-century philosophies of language and science, as well as in cognitive linguistics, a firm conviction was established that metaphors are not only a normal but also an indispensable part of our everyday language and our processes of learning about the world.[1] Although this assumption is not completely unknown in the history of ideas on language, it seems nowadays it is to a great extent due to the enduring influence of the cognitivist, basically anti-Aristotelian, approach to metaphors both in linguistics and the philosophy of mind.[2] Metaphors are considered a necessary means of our cognition and, consequently, a large part of contemporary theories of language and knowledge are concerned with exploring metaphors. Moreover, it is theories of metaphor that consider themselves as the cardinal and comprehensive mode of criticism against positivistic and reductionist conception of rationalism in science, knowledge and language. Metaphors are conceived as furnishing the necessary connection between the static and dynamic aspects of meaning in language and of ideas within the field of knowledge, a connection that was missed in earlier semantic theories of language and epistemology of science in the first half of the 20th century.

This contemporary philosophical appraisal of metaphors is usually taken to be a direct or indirect effect of Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum in his 1873 essay "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne" [*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*], where he asserted the fundamentally metaphorical character both of human language and thought. However, Nietzsche was most certainly not the first to formulate the fundamental importance of metaphors for our thinking, including philosophy.[3] Since then,

1   See a recent survey of sharply diverging positions in the contemporary metaphor theories with a proposal of a reasonable middle ground in Haack (2019).

2   See Reddy (1979), Lakoff and Johnson (1984), MacCormac (1985), Indurkhya (1992, 1994). For a more recent survey of different theoretical approaches to conceptual metaphors and a theoretical appreciation of cognitivism see Stanojević (2013). For the concept of a 'mental lexicon' see Dobrovol'skij and Piirinen (2021).

3   For a pre-Nietzschean perspective on metaphors see my discussion on Ch. Lichtenberg in Ch. 11.

the claim that metaphors make up a great part both of our literary language and everyday speech, as well as of rational discourse in science, philosophy and in different theories belonging to the humanities, has been considered a mere truism. But once we ask what this dictum really means and where it actually comes from, it ceases to be a truism. It seems to entail much more than what Nietzsche's claims about the metaphorical origin of our notions actually imply, namely, that metaphors epitomize the essential mode of how language is constituted or, to put it more precisely, that the signification system—the way language refers to the world of objects and the way it encompasses the abstract world of meanings—is constructed like the very particular trope we know under the label of metaphor. In other words, language itself is *essentially* metaphorical. This means that metaphors, being just one trope of speech among others, have become the *paradigm* of language as a whole. As a consequence, since Nietzsche's radical estimation of metaphors is ambiguous in that it is both positive, as a reception of the Romantic theory of language as system, and negative, as an act against the romantic overestimation of speech as individual performance, metaphoric expressions are no more considered exceptions within normal language but rather as evidence of its essential *rule*. Since then, they are not believed any more to belong exclusively and properly to poetic discourse but to rationality and discourse in general.[4]

The consequences of this post-Romanticist Nietzchean line of thought for contemporary theories of human languages, especially for semantic theories, have been immense. One of the most striking of those consequences is that the so-called literal meaning of terms and expressions turns out to be nothing but a petrified case of metaphorical expressions, and that there is no literal expression in any language that not only could be used metaphorically but is metaphorical in its origin. It is this characteristic of linguistic expressions which suggests that metaphorical procedures within language are more general and more essential to any language than the so-called literality. Or, to put it in more radical words, nothing in the world has ever been called by its proper name, but only and neccesarily by an "improper"

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4   As I try to show in chapters 4 and 5, this process is not peculiarly restricted to the modern era's Romanticist philosophy of Herder's and Hamann's but can be traced back to its origin in Plato's late dialogues dealing with dialectics as method.

word. Words do not refer to things despite evidence provided by obvious deictic acts. Rather, they evoke and indicate things by mobilizing and inducing specific semantic content, which we establish in contrast—or even in opposition—to other content, and which we try to establish objectively in communication with others and struggle for.

At first glance, this view of language, which is spread throughout different perspectives in theories of discourse (hermeneutical, poststructuralist, and analytic), seems somewhat exaggerated. Intuitively, we can agree with it, at least in so far as it states that, in our actual language, there are still literal uses of words, in spite of the historical genesis of words through metaphorical processes; hence, there are literal meanings of sentences and entire discourses. Moreover, the very assumption of a metaphorical origin of literal expressions entails the presupposition that some pre-metaphorical expressions must have been "metaphorized" in order to become literal expressions for us. If so, what does, then, the very term metaphorical refer to? As a matter of fact, some analytical philosophers of language have tried to show that, although we apparently must deny the traditional assumption that language refers or designates, but rather indicates, we need not say that language as such is wholly a *metaphorical construct*, which partly and successively, through human history, becomes a "firm" and "petrified" *system* of signs and their meanings. However, even if we say that words do not designate or refer, but indicate, realities in the world, we say that they have literal meaning and are "veridical".[5] The verification is not a process of referring to facts as an objective and separate world outside language but to other conceptual systems. Our definitions are descriptions of the unknown by the known, and, as such, they are encyclopedic rather than dictionary-based systems of referring to things in the world. Our objective knowledge, which is expressed in language, is an accumulation of our experience which largely fits to (or with) our world. In this view of language, we intuitively start with literal meanings and are not forced to assume that there are other than literal meanings. Moreover, it seems only coherent to say that there is no metaphorical meaning of words. What there is, instead, is metaphorical *use* of words which—depending on competences of language users—brings about producing and introducing "fresh" and "innovative" expressions or thoughts in

5   See Davidson (1984).

different fields, such as everyday language, poetry and literature, and also in science.

Despite this vast and apparently pacifying consensus, a decisive breakthrough of metaphors into contemporary philosophies of language has been brought about by theorists and historians of science who were concerned with overcoming the narrow framework of positivistic theories of knowledge and a proper rational language. Nonetheless, despite several veritable revolutionary turns in theories of language, the issue of genetic priority of metaphors over literal expressions in language and of their indispensable role in generating and improving human knowledge has remained largely unsolved. Recent genetic currents in language theories definitely seem to abandon the cultural-historical pattern of different hermeneutical theories and philosophies of language which characteristically overestimate metaphor as principle of language.[6] The genetic explanation of language includes a radical idea that there is a genetically "encoded" universal human language, called *mentalese*, which gets transformed into a variety of languages by means of translation processes.

Consequently, for theories of metaphor based on hermeneutical views of language and knowledge, in order to establish an absolute, genetic and structural priority of metaphors in language, one cannot appeal to language itself but to language users who are both linguistic and language-transcending beings and whose relation to the world is accordingly—due to the capacity of reflecting the limits of language—linguistic (symbolic) and trans-linguistic. In other words, if one wants to explain metaphors, one has to build upon the assumption that, regardless of either literal or metaphorical *origin* of words, it is possible to establish *a principal difference* between purportedly literal meaning of expressions and metaphorical use of language. And this is exactly what new theories about the role of metaphors in language and knowledge do not offer, because the assumption entails that a linguistic behaviour, such as using words metaphorically, cannot be explained by means of linguistics only and, furthermore, that using words metaphorically, as a linguistic practice, is not necessarily and not exclusively a linguistic, but a broader semiotic and behavioral phenomenon.

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[6]   See the discussion in MacCormac (1990), referring to Stephen C. Pepper's approach to metaphor (Pepper 1970).

However, if it is true that we have to distinguish between the literal meaning of expressions, on the one hand, and their metaphorical use on the other, this distinction entails a typological and ontological difference between linguistic units (abstract objects) and linguistic behaviour, the latter implying that there is a real linguistic subject, which is capable of reflecting the limits of language and is not just an instrument (or carrier) of language but rather a subject subjected, a manipulator of language manipulated by language, or, to put it in somewhat "poetic" words, a player in the language game about the world. This subject should be seen as manipulated insofar as it is inevitably a part of a concrete historical society which, at once, is a linguistic community; but it (the subject) should also be seen as a manipulator insofar as it is a competent user of language and can, under certain circumstances, detach itself from one language code and move through linguistic levels within the community it belongs to, combine or, even, replace them with one another. On this background, the ability and practice of using words metaphorically appears not only as a phenomenon of linguistic attitude but rather as a means of socio-political behaviour.

It is useful to remark, however, that this idea of political behaviour is not necessarily derived from the general assumption, formulated by Aristotle, about the essence of humans as "political animals" by their very nature, due to their generic character of being "logical (rational) animals" capable both of understanding one another and agree with one another. Although this is a general presupposition of anthropology and of most mainstream social theories, and allegedly a necessary presupposition of all modern politics, the real idea is not that all humans are political beings due to their sharing a common, substantially defined "human nature" and its uniquely special instance called language. Rather, the 'rational animals' are *political* only by putting forward *different meanings* or, to put it more dramatically, by initiating *struggle for meanings* and producing gaps within the body of meanings upon which a community is built. One of the means for humans to be *political* in the fundamental and strong sense of the word seems to be the aptitude for using language metaphorically, i.e. for being able to *intervene* in a commonly shared corpus of 'straight' meanings of words and usual expressions within a language. In this sense, both literal and metaphorical use of language are never 'merely' linguistic but represent a form of really occurring politics.

This holds despite the fact that not all language is metaphorical and not all metaphorical language refers to politics in the strict sense of the word, but rather characterises the realm of literature or science. In light of this, Aristotle is to be considered as the real and—as I intend to show—realistic theoretician both of normality and innovative potentials of metaphoric speech.[7]

Since Aristotle, traditional explanations of the use of metaphors in political discourse have been provided by theorists of rhetoric. Metaphors have been considered contingent but useful means of the art of persuasion. Contrary to poetic discourse, the use of metaphor in public affairs has been linked to the idea of some "moral" (or ethical) truth. Similarly to scientific discourse, in politics a certain criterion of truth appears to require that a limit or measure of using metaphors be defined, at least tacitly. Otherwise, metaphors tend, in and of themselves, to dissolve boundaries of any "serious discourse". This makes the background of the traditional assumption, based again on Aristotle's accounts, that metaphors in such non-scientific discourse as politics are allowed but not necessarily a good tool. The more the discourse becomes scientific, as in definitions of principles, the less metaphors are allowed or welcome. Recent theories on metaphors have stated, however, that metaphors not only make an underlying and almost indispensable means of language, knowledge, and rational discourse, but are their constitutive and necessary factor.

Therefore, even if one does not share the idea, common in contemporary hermeneutical philosophy of language, that 'being' or everything about the world that is represented in language and knowledge is by itself either directly metaphorical or metaphorically generated or in some other way based upon metaphor, but accepts the opposite idea that metaphors exist due to a specific, not strictly code-dependent way of using language, one still has to face the question why, and in which sense, metaphors should be considered constitutive both of our language consciousness in general and of our everyday linguistic behaviour, a part of which is also our social and political discourse.

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7 See Mahon (1999) for a reappraisal of Aristotle's overall stance to metaphors, against the contemporary "shallow scholarship" on Aristotle in the Anglo-Saxon context; earlier attempts in Lacks (1994); my discussion in Mikulić (2013). [Here chapters 6 and 7.]

In order to answer these questions, the general consensus of theories concerning the all-pervasiveness of metaphors seems not to suffice and has to be sharpened. Metaphors are not just a historical and ever-lasting resource of our normal everyday language that can be taken for granted. For individuals, in order to produce meanings in everyday life, one cannot and must not take the metaphorical origin of words as a satisfying truism for the simple reason that it is only by metaphors as an instrument of discourse that individuals become able *to appeal to a reality presumably different from discourse*. This reality cannot be said to lie in the so-called average common language that completely overlaps with reality in the sense of 'commonly known world'. In other words, metaphors are a necessary means of (every) language because they are *symptoms* of something other than a world totally represented by language. The intriguing feature of metaphor seems to lie precisely in this double and paradoxical role of revealing the limits of language at the very line where it appears as re-creating itself from itself.

As a consequence, the general tendency to rehabilitate metaphors in scientific discourse—and this is provided by scientific discourse about the sciences and knowledge—has brought about the establishment of multiple ways not only of explaining things by metaphors ("what metaphors do") but also of exploring more deeply the linguistic or semiotic structure of metaphor ("what metaphors are"). Thus, since the second half of the 20th century, we have been confronted with a flourishing epistemology of metaphor, concerned with exploring metaphoric structures both of heuristic tools and of objects in different fields of human activity. This is also true of the research fields of social and political sciences. The immense extension of such a particular theory as the theory of metaphor into other fields than theory of science or literary theory is due not only to a simple application of analogy and model theories from one scientific field to another. The inflation of theories of metaphor in different currents of philosophy and in linguistics is rather due to their own achievements and results from 1970s onwards. These results coincide with one another despite stemming from different, or even opposing, theoretical traditions.

The main common result of different approaches, such as in metaphor-oriented linguistics, philosophies of language and epistemologies, is that the whole system of comprehension

in human culture is based, broadly speaking, upon metaphoric structures and that this comprehension system functions as a system of replacing one item with another. This opinion has led to borderline assumptions about language, contentious and of less discursive type, such as 'all is metaphor', as well as apparently comprehensive ones and of more discursive type, such as 'all our basic expressions, or even the whole system of symbolic representations, verbal or visual, are meant to be literal, but the basic patterns of representing thoughts/ideas turn out to be metaphoric'. The latter assumption is due to the belief that our conceptual apparatus is based on our relationship to the physical world. To mention but one example, a sentence like "She/He is a highly moral person" is meant as a literal sentence, a judgement about a person. But the expression 'highly moral' is due to the more deeply posited assumptions about morality in terms of physicality, such as: 'being moral' equals 'being morally good', 'highly moral' entails implicit equations of good=high, bad=low, and the analogy good : bad ≈ high : low, etc.[8] Thus, our system of comprehension, albeit intended to be literal, turns out, in its very intimate structure, to be metaphoric, non-literal, and indirect. As a consequence, even when we intend to speak literally, we necessarily (always already) speak in metaphors. Moreover, when we use metaphors consciously, i.e. as proper metaphors, we only relate to rules which have already been built in our conceptual system, underlying our language and expressed by it.

As a consequence of such cognitive theoretical assumptions, metaphors are not considered a "mere" phenomenon of language to be explained by linguistics, rhetoric, semiotics or analysis of literary style. Being embedded in the deep level of our very conceptual apparatus, by which we grasp the world, metaphors have developed, through different speech acts, in different directions and to fit different semiotic systems, of which verbal language is but one (albeit the main one).

Roughly speaking, there are three main theories of metaphor differentiated according to three different levels of situating metaphoric transfer.[9] 1) Semiotic theories, which explain metaphoric transfer on the basis of the sign structure marked by the difference between the signifier and the signified and by

8   Lakoff and Johnson (1984).

9   See Haverkamp (1983).

an inevitable sliding of different signifiers (Lacan, Derrida) or of different signified items (Saussure, Jakobson, Benveniste). 2) Conceptualist and cognitivist theories of metaphor, which conceive metaphors independently of the semiotic level of signs, be they signifiers or signifieds. Metaphors are not produced by signs. It is rather the metaphoric structure of the human conceptual system which produces metaphors as wholes, as integral signs (Lakoff and Johnson). 3) Linguistic theories of metaphor stemming generally from the linguistic theory of "semantic fields of language" or "word fields". As a basically Saussurian model of linguistics, they posit that every unit of our language is defined by and used through an appeal to a set of differential relations to other units.

Despite a variety of attempts to rehabilitate metaphor in scientific discourse about language and knowledge, the whole issue seems to entail a great deal of overvaluation in the sense that a peculiar (semiotic, lexical or stylistic) form of speaking becomes a general feature of both language and thought. If everything in our conceptual apparatus consists of or is based on metaphors, then metaphor runs the risk of becoming trivial. Another consequence, which is visible in the deconstructivist current of semiotics and the postmodern philosophy of difference, such as Derrida's, which is both inspired by and critical towards Heidegger's *use* of his own interpretation of language in philosophy, is that metaphoric discourse tends to become a mode of unlimited literalisation of metaphors where any difference between the literal and the metaphoric within language vanishes and any difference between language and non-linguistic reality is impossible to conceive. Words are interpreted as if each and every one was a metaphor, every word-metaphor a picture, and every picture a thing-phenomenon.

As a result, the most important task of scientific theories of metaphor has become not only to rethink and apply metaphors, but also to limit their field, to reestablish the difference between metaphoric and literal discourse, to trace the difference between meaning and use etc.[10] More precisely, this means that the task of theories of metaphor has been to shape and define the non-trivial

10 See the controversy in Rorty and Hesse (1987) over how fundamental, or only useful, are metaphors to science and the discussion by S. Haack (1987). See also Keysar (1989) who argues for a functional equivalence of the literal and metaphoric interpretations.

(i.e. non-literalized) aspect of metaphoric language, to identify the impact of metaphor on our knowledge, and to assess the necessity of using metaphors. This has been the most difficult aspect of the whole problem of theories of metaphor in the last fifty years, or even longer, because it does not seem possible to resolve without a meta-theory of metaphors. This, again, presupposes that metaphors be universalized or generalized over and over again. And this implies that we eventually come to define metaphors, and reason about them, metaphorically.

Thus, in order to analyse metaphors as non-trivial features of language, it has to be shown that they are an irreplaceable means of our expressions, be they linguistic or non-lingustic. For they are produced in and by expressions. Still, in order to be a necessary and irreplaceable means of expression, metaphor must not be reconcilable with the function of substituting the literal or pretending to replace the literal. Instead, the metaphoric mode of expression has—very much to the regret of all modern and postmodern anti-Aristotelian friends of metaphor—to insist on being an improperly placed—a displaced—'name', if it is expected to be able to "say new things", just as Aristotle put it.[11] ●

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11 See 'τὸ καινὰ λέγειν', Aristoteles, Rhet. III. xi. 5–6 (1412a11 sq).