Ways of Reading

Advanced reading skills for students of English literature

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In memoriam
Gillian Skirrow

Unit 13 Metaphor

LITERAL AND NON-LITERAL LANGUAGE

In this and the next unit we look at various uses of non-literal language which as literary devices are collectively called **figurative language**. Certain kinds of figurative language are traditionally called **tropes**; these include metaphor, simile, metonymy and synechdoche (which we discuss in this unit) and verbal irony (which we discuss in Unit 14).

A spoken utterance or written sentence potentially has two fundamentally different sorts of meaning: a literal meaning and (sometimes) an implied, non-literal meaning. Meaning is interpreted in two steps:

(1) by decoding its literal meaning;
(2) then by inferring its implied (non-literal) meaning.

Literal meaning is a meaning which is fixed – always the same, predictable and shared by speakers – for a particular word or group of words. The English word *two*, for example, has a literal meaning, referring to a particular number; and the English word *cat* has a literal meaning, referring to a particular type of animal. Most words have meanings of this kind. When words are put together into phrases and then into sentences, their individual literal meanings combine to form a collective literal meaning. So the meaning of *two cats* is predictable from the individual meanings of the words *two* and *cat*. In this way, a sentence (which is made up of words) has a literal meaning formed from the literal meanings of the words which compose it.

Many sentences also have non-literal meaning, however, which can be called their **implied meaning**. If someone asks you what the time is and you say 'five-thirty', your utterance may well not be literally true (it might be 5.28 or 5.31 etc.). But the hearer can compensate for this: s/he can interpret what you say by adding 'approximately' in her or his head as you speak. The words *five-thirty* can accordingly mean 'approximately five-thirty'. If you and that person are about to go to a film, and s/he asks what the time is and you say 'too late', s/he can add a meaning 'too late to get to the film on time'. You did not literally say this; but s/he can work out that this is a meaning you intended. This process of adding meanings, or building

additional meanings out of literal meanings, is called **inferencing**; s/he infers a meaning from your statement.

A figurative word, phrase or sentence is an example of non-literal meaning, and so is interpreted by inferencing, which involves the addition of meanings not literally present in the text. These meanings come from the reader or hearer or viewer, who supplies the meanings from what s/he knows. Because different audiences know different things, so ironies, metaphors, etc. may be interpreted differently by different people.

We can illustrate the distinction between literal and figurative uses using the example of the word *dead* which can be used literally or figuratively. When words are used or interpreted literally, they are understood at face value. If someone says 'Winston Churchill is dead', we take the word *dead* at face value, assuming it simply means 'no longer alive'. A figurative use or interpretation, on the other hand, assumes that a word or phrase should be understood in terms of another, figurative meaning. If someone says 'I feel dead today', it makes no sense to take the utterance as literally true; instead, it has to be interpreted figuratively – typically, as a way of emphasizing how tired the person is. The word *dead*, then, can be used and understood in two different ways: either literally or figuratively.

Signals of figurative language

How do we decide whether to take a statement literally or figuratively? If a trope is being used, it is usually signalled in some way; if there is no signal, we usually read literally. Signals that language is being used figuratively can be of two kinds: textual and contextual.

A textual signal is given by there being something unusual about the piece of language itself, regardless of the situation it is used in. Most often, such a signal is that the language cannot make literal sense; we understand *I feel dead* figuratively, for instance, because it is difficult to imagine any context in which *I feel dead* could be meant literally.

A contextual signal, on the other hand, is given when, although the words themselves make literal sense, the context in which they are used suggests that they are somehow inappropriate, and require a further process of interpretation. This is often the case with verbal irony.

The distinction between literal and figurative is complicated, however, by the fact that many statements can make sense both literally and figuratively. The claim, *Winston Churchill is dead* is evidently true on a literal level, but in the context of a discussion of the British character, *Churchill is dead* may mean that a particular warlike attitude, or so-called 'bulldog spirit', has disappeared. The decision whether to interpret an utterance figuratively or literally (or even both at once) is not always easy, even when we take both textual and contextual signals into account.

METAPHOR

The word *metaphor* comes from a Greek word *metaphora*, meaning 'to transfer' or 'to carry over'. Metaphor occurs when a word or phrase in a passage is clearly out of place in the topic being dealt with but nevertheless makes sense because of some similarity between it and what is being talked about. To interpret the word or phrase, we automatically look for the element of similarity and transfer it into the new context. In doing this, we interpret metaphorically.

When Paul Simon sings 'I am a rock' (1966) we are unlikely to think that he is made of stone or wonder how a rock can sing. Rather, we select those aspects of a rock which might also characterize how the singer may feel or want to represent himself and transfer them to the new context. The metaphor which results is effective because, in describing psychological experience in terms of a 'rock', it vividly transfers our associations of rock – such as hardness, isolation, imperviousness – to the singer (there is also an allusion here to the metaphorical use of the term *rock* in the Bible, which adds or suggests further possible meanings for Simon's phrase).

Analogously, in the statement *by the year 2000 manufacturing will be dominated by industries now at an embryonic stage*, the word *embryonic* does not initially appear to fit in a discussion of industry and manufacturing (because literally it is a term for the offspring of an animal before birth or emergence from an egg). To make sense of *embryonic* in this unusual context, we select those parts of its meaning which allow us to interpret the word in a discussion about industry. *At an embryonic stage* becomes a figurative way of saying that the industries of the future are as yet at a rudimentary level of development. The idea of natural gestation is also transferred into the new context, however, and we are therefore invited to see the development of industry as in some way a natural process; this offers us a reassuring sense that the new industries are to be welcomed. In this way, metaphor can significantly affect how we perceive or respond to what is being described.

Simile

Simile is a category of metaphor in that, as its name suggests, it draws attention to a similarity between two terms. But whereas in metaphor the link between the terms is implied, in simile it is made through an explicit textual signal (*like*, *as*, etc.). Simile does not, strictly speaking, always entail figurative language, since both terms of a simile can often be understood literally. The simile *the sky is like a polished mirror*, for example, invites the listener or reader to imagine how the sky might actually appear like a polished mirror. This difference between simile and metaphor can be demonstrated by turning the simile into a metaphor. If we say *the sky is a polished mirror* this formulation can no longer be understood literally; we know that the sky is not really a polished mirror, though it might look like one, and therefore *polished mirror* has to be read metaphorically,

Metonymy

Metonymy (Greek for 'a change of name') is distinguished from metaphor in that, whereas metaphor works through similarity, metonymy works through other kinds of association (e.g. cause–effect, attribute, containment, etc.).

The sentence *Moscow made a short statement* makes sense only if we understand it figuratively, taking *Moscow* to stand for the leaders of the Soviet Union. This figure is possible not because of any obvious similarity between the city and the people, but because the two are associated with each other (one is the place where the other lives and works). Metonymies can be formed through many different kinds of associative link. Typical dress, for example, can be used metonymically to stand for those who wear it: if someone says 'a lot of big wigs came to the party', we understand *big wigs* to refer to 'important people' (a metonymy which probably derives from the fashion among the upper classes in earlier centuries in Europe of wearing elaborate wigs in public – a practice still followed by judges and barristers in court).

Synecdoche

Synecdoche (Greek for 'taking together') is a subcategory of metonymy. It occurs when the association between the figurative and literal senses is that between a part and the whole to which it belongs. *Farm hands* is a common synecdoche for workers on a farm; *a new motor* comes to mean 'a new car' by using one part of the car, its engine, to stand for the whole. (Note that the *big wig* is not a part of the person to which it belongs, and so would not be called synecdoche; instead, it is simply associated with the person.)

ANALYSING METAPHORS

Tenor, vehicle, ground

A metaphor consists of two terms or levels: the figurative and the literal. I.A. Richards (1936) proposed that the literal level should be called the **tenor** and the figurative level the **vehicle**. In Paul Simon's metaphor, the vehicle or metaphorical term is 'rock' (since this word cannot be taken literally); the tenor (what is actually being talked about) is 'I' (the singer). In the discussion of future industries, the vehicle is 'embryonic' and the tenor is what is literally being said about the state of industries – something like 'at an early stage of development'. The process of transference through which metaphor works can only take place if there is a link between the context in which a word is normally used and the new context in which it is applied; Richards suggested that such a link should be called the **ground**. In the case of metaphors, the ground is one of similarity; with metonymies, the ground involves some other kind of association such as the one thing being next to or inside the other.

Explicit and implicit metaphors

In an explicit metaphor, one thing is described as if it were another thing. 'I am a rock' is an explicit metaphor. This is not only because both its tenor ('I') and its vehicle ('rock') are specified within the text; it is also because a link is explicitly made between tenor and vehicle by the use of the verb *to be* ('I am a rock'). Bob Dylan's suggestion that 'time is a jetplane – it moves too fast' (1974) is another explicit metaphor. In this case, as well as providing the tenor ('time'), the vehicle ('jetplane'), and a form of the verb *to be* ('is') which links the two, the phrase also specifies the ground of the metaphor (time can be called a jetplane because they both 'move too fast'). This is in fact an unusual metaphor because it makes the ground explicit; in most cases the ground must be inferred.

In contrast to explicit metaphors, an implicit metaphor occurs when one word or phrase stands directly in place of another. One half of the comparison (the tenor) is absent, and so remains implicit. The suggestion that certain industries are at an embryonic stage includes the vehicle or metaphorical term ('embryonic'), but it leaves the reader to infer what the tenor is. The vehicle has been substituted for the tenor which would otherwise have appeared in its place in the sentence.

Metaphors using different parts of speech

So far, many of the metaphors we have looked at involve nouns. But other parts of speech (see Unit 3: Analysing units of structure) can also be used as metaphors, as the following list shows:

Noun: 'time is a *jetplane*'
(Bob Dylan, 'You're a big girl now' (1974))
'You are the *apple* of my eye'

Verb: 'time us *running out*'
'the hour glass *whispers* to the lion's roar'
(Auden, 'Our bias' (1940)

Adjective: '*golden* skin'
'a *wooden* performance'

Adverb: Thistles dried to sticks in last year's wind
stand *nakedly* in the green,
stand *sullenly* in the slowly whitening,
field.
(Adrienne Rich, 'Toward the solstice' (1977))

Classifying metaphors

Besides classifying metaphors according to the parts of speech they involve, it is also possible to classify them according to the types of transference of

meaning they employ (see Geoffrey Leech 1969). A **concretive metaphor** uses a concrete term to talk about an abstract thing. Examples include *the burden of responsibility* and *every cloud has a silver lining*. Religious discourse often uses concretive metaphors to make abstract ideas more vivid: heaven is frequently referred to as if it were a place or a building – 'In my Father's house there are many mansions.' An **animistic metaphor** uses a term usually associated with animate things (living creatures) to talk about an inanimate thing. Examples include *the leg of the table* and *killing a bottle*. A **humanizing** or **anthropomorphic metaphor** (sometimes called **personification**) uses a term usually associated with human beings to talk about a non-human thing. Examples include *the hands of the clock* and *the kettle's sad song*. Humanizing metaphor is connected with the **pathetic fallacy** (the idea that the world reflects or participates in one's emotions); *the kettle's sad song* might be used as a way of indicating a character's mood by implicitly describing how s/he perceives the kettle's sound.

Extended metaphor

When a piece of language uses several vehicles from the same area of thought, it is possible to speak of extended metaphor. Extended metaphor is a common literary device. Marvell, in 'A dialogue between the soul and body' (1681), talks of the soul's relation to the body as follows:

> O who shall from this dungeon raise
> A soul enslaved so many ways?
> With bolts of bones, that fettered stands
> In feet; and manacled in hands

Taking the once commonplace metaphor of the body as a prison of the soul, Marvell extends it by selecting a series of vehicles concerned with imprisonment ('dungeon', 'enslaved', 'bolts', 'fettered', 'manacles'), and transferring them to the human body.

Mixed metaphor

Books on 'good style' generally condemn the use of mixed metaphor (the combination of two or more metaphors whose vehicles come from different and incongruous areas) because they can have unintentionally ludicrous effects. For precisely this reason, jokes often exploit mixed metaphor (e.g. *I shall make no bones about the skeletons in the cupboard*). M.H. Abrams (1988) claims that mixed metaphor in poetry can have a functional effect – as in the following lines from *Hamlet* (1601):

> To be, or not to be: that is the question;
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them
>
> (III, i, 56–60)

Hamlet mixes his metaphors in this passage since he represents the struggle between the individual and fortune as a battle (fortune has its 'slings and arrows' and the individual may 'take arms'), but takes his next metaphor ('sea') from a completely different area. In literal terms it is evidently ludicrous to imagine taking a sword to fight the sea. But Abrams suggests that this mixing of metaphors might be a symptom of Hamlet's troubled mind. It is also possible to suggest that it underlines the futility of trying to resist 'outrageous fortune'.

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF METAPHOR

Metaphor and language change

Metaphor is crucial to the way language changes, and can be seen as a process of change in action. New metaphors are constantly being developed whenever a new area of experience or thought needs new descriptive terms (see Unit 4: Language and time).

When a new term is needed, the tendency is to make the unfamiliar familiar by borrowing terms from other fields (so forming metaphors) rather than to invent new terms. *The greenhouse effect* involves a metaphor which figures the global system of the earth as a giant greenhouse. This might help us to understand an unfamiliar idea, but it may also work to domesticate the effect in question and thereby reduce our sense of alarm.

Gradually, however, metaphors become overfamiliar and cease to be recognized as metaphors at all. When this happens, they lose their power to confront us with their effects as metaphors. Everyday language is full of terms which would once have required a metaphorical interpretation, but which are now so familiar that they produce no effect at all. A speaker of English would not normally be conscious of producing two (very different) metaphors in claiming that *things are looking up for the team since the landslide victory last week*. Yet both *things are looking up* and *landslide* have to be understood as metaphors since they cannot be taken literally in the context.

Words and phrases which are metaphorical, but cease to be treated as if they are, are called **dead metaphors** (notice, incidentally, that the phrase *dead metaphor* is itself a dead metaphor). Some dead metaphors can be revived, nevertheless, if we draw attention to the fact that they are metaphors. We can temporarily revive the metaphorical nature of *made my blood boil* by extending the metaphor: *it made my blood boil and steam come out of my ears*.

It is sometimes suggested that literature can be distinguished from non-literary discourse because literature uses language metaphorically, while

non-literary discourse uses it literally. A more useful way of thinking about how metaphor is used, however, is to imagine a 'spectrum' of language types, ranging from discourses which consist mostly of literal usages and dead metaphors through to discourses which are highly conscious in their use of new and vivid metaphors.

The persuasive effects of metaphor

Metaphors can be used to reinforce our images of the world, or to challenge them. Figurative language can significantly affect our attitude towards the topic under discussion, and is capable of affecting us even (or perhaps especially) if we do not consciously recognize that it is being used. This is possibly why it is so common in advertising, politics and journalism. The rhetorical purpose or implication of a metaphor can usually be grasped, nevertheless, by thinking about the connotations (implied meanings) it brings to its new context, and then asking what effects those connotations are likely to have on the way we perceive or respond to what is being talked about (see the examples of *embryonic* and *greenhouse* examined above).

Terms of address used primarily or exclusively by men to address women include *honey, baby, doll, hen,* etc.: all dead metaphors, figuring women as food, immature, playthings, animals, etc. These metaphors figure women in ways which reinforce conventional images and attitudes, and therefore both reflect and reproduce those conventions. Drawing out the implications of such metaphorical 'terms of endearment' can contribute to exposing the way such conventions are embedded in our language in a wide range of dead metaphors.

When metaphor works against convention, on the other hand, it can operate as a powerful challenge to established ways of thinking. Wallace Stevens puts the point the other way round: 'Reality is a cliche from which we escape by metaphor.' Rather than promoting a conventional way of seeing the world, a metaphor which draws attention to itself as a metaphor can make demands on our power of creative interpretation. At the end of Norman MacCaig's 'Fetching cows' (1965), for example, the speaker produces a metaphor which demands that we reconsider the sentimental way we often regard farm animals and that we think instead about how we use them as sources of food:

> The black cow is two native carriers
> Bringing its belly home, slung from a pole.

Each time such challenging metaphors are produced, the way language maps the world is altered. Domains which the language usually keeps separate are momentarily fused, and new meanings are brought into existence.

Metaphor in history

Historically, metaphor has served both radical and conservative purposes. This is reflected in shifting attitudes towards it in the history of literature in English.

In the neoclassical period (*c* 1660–1790), poetry was widely thought of as a process of retelling truths which were generally shared and accepted – or, as Alexander Pope puts it in his *Essay on Criticism* (1709), 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. This outlook can be thought of as a conservative one in that it emphasizes the reflection of existing meanings rather than the creation of new ones. In this period, metaphor was distrusted as a potentially falsifying device whose use ought to be sanctioned by social convention or 'decorum'. Although metaphor could be used to 'dress' or embellish accepted and acceptable truths, care was to be taken to keep it subservient to that end. It was even suggested in 1670 that an Act of Parliament should be introduced forbidding the use of 'fulsome and luscious' metaphors.

The Romantic poets, by contrast, thought of metaphor not as an embellishment of thought but as the means of imaginative thought itself. They argued that poetry should not be restricted to saying old things in new ways, but could be made capable of creating new thoughts and ideas; this view was influentially formulated in Shelley's 'A defence of poetry' (1821):

> [The language of poets] is virtually metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, . . . if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purpose of human intercourse.

In this view, thoughts and ideas do not exist prior to metaphor; rather, they are produced by metaphor. Far from presenting 'what oft was thought', poetic metaphor 'disorganizes' conventional analogies in order to reveal relations which were 'unapprehended' beforehand. As such, metaphor can be seen as an agency through which it becomes possible significantly to transform our perceptions of the world. And since 'poetic' metaphor, in Shelley's sense, is not necessarily confined to poetry, it is possible to generalize from his suggestion to the idea that producing, responding to and analysing metaphor is a form of active participation in the circulation and criticism of meanings in society.

ACTIVITY

Part A

1 Read the following pieces of text and then carry out the operations below (for definitions, see the exposition above).

(a) Open cast mining rapes countryside.
(b) An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick.
(Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928))
(c) The plot is so thick the spoon stands up in it.
(d) I was left for dead by the fastest wheels on the road.
(e) After a somewhat leaden opening, the play's fluid plot captivated the audience.

2 Identify as many uses of figurative language as you can in the above examples. In each case, say what kind of figure is involved (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, simile, etc.).
3 For each figure, identify where appropriate: (a) the vehicle; (b) the tenor; (c) the ground.
4 For the metaphors, say whether they are (a) explicit or implicit; (b) dead, revived or fresh; (c) extended or mixed; (d) concretive, animistic or humanizing.
5 Make a note describing a purpose for each figure. Ask youself: what connotations does the vehicle carry over into the new context? How does the figure influence our perception of the thing being presented?

Part B

6 Read the following poem by Langston Hughes (1951).

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

7 Identify as many uses of figurative language in the poem as you can.
8 Is there a pattern in the way the poem uses a metaphor and simile?
9 Is the word 'dream' a metaphor? If so, what is it a metaphor for? (The title and the date might help you here.)
10 What do the metaphors and similes in the second section of the poem (from 'Does it dry up' to 'syrupy sweet') suggest might happen if the dream is deferred?

11 What does the metaphor and simile in the third section suggest?
12 What does the metaphor in the fourth section suggest? (What is the effect of the fact that the last metaphor breaks with the metaphor–simile pattern?)
13 Referring to your analysis of its figurative language, try to summarize the poem's meaning.

READING

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