

Metonymy

Part 1

Comments and counter-suggestions on the following preliminary readings:

Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Metaphors we live by
Panther and Thornburg 2004, The role of conceptual metonymy in meaning construction
Raden and Kovecses , Towards a Theory of metonymy
Otono 2001, High level metonymy and linguistic structure
Gibbs 1994, Figurative thought and figurative language

Metonymy and synecdoche are **ill-defined**.

Essentially, they are not defined at all. Instead of providing a definition of Metonymy the authors merely assemble an extensive range **examples** in order **to show how Metonymy is characteristically used**.

An obvious problem with the standard approach by L & J (also found in the other papers we looked at) is that **their view of metonymy does not account for the difference between metonymies and metaphors** (in fact one could say that metaphor in their account is just another manifestation of metonymic relations) => A number of utterances that empirical intuition would pin down as metaphorical must be seen as metonymies, whereas many of the utterances they confidently group as metonymic seem more like metaphors.

One can easily see an example of this contradiction in the test L & J use (1980) to peel apart *metaphorical personification* from *metonymy*. They produce the following two examples:

- a. inflation robbed me of my savings
- b. the ham sandwich left

and then propose: *In (a) we are not using 'inflation' to refer to a person but impute human qualities to it. In (b) though we do not impute human qualities to the 'ham sandwich' but use it to refer to sth else. Hence (a) = personification metaphor and (b) = metonymy.*

Take, however, the following 3 utterances:

1. the rose died [said of an actual rose]
2. the rose died [said of a fragile and sensitive person]
3. the rose died [said of a girl holding a rose]

Although **L & J's characterization** distinguishes between (1) and (3) as distinct phenomena, it **does not capture at all the difference between (2) and (3)**. In both cases (2 and 3) we use 'rose' to refer to sth else rather than impute human qualities to the rose. So, are they both metonymies?

If we try and paraphrase referential metaphors and metonymies using the target as the subject of the sentence and the vehicle as predicate, metaphors like '*the rose died*', [said of a fragile person, e.g. Mary], will give acceptable sentences of the sort '*Mary is a rose*' but metonymies such as 'the ham sandwich left', [said of customer x], when paraphrased will give the awkward sentence:

? 'customer x is a ham sandwich'.

However if we use a definite instead of an indefinite description:

'customer x is the ham sandwich'

the paraphrase seems legitimate. There is something about this definite description however that makes it feel a lot like a quote, like an interpretively used expression. It is as if the speaker uses the description 'the ham sandwich' in inverted commas, as if they use it **interpretively** rather than **descriptively**.

Also compare:

'The pretty face left' =>

a) 'she is a pretty face', [*held by L & J as a metonymy]

to

b) 'she is the pretty face'

A problem I have with the example 'she is a pretty face' seen by L & J as a metonymy is that it does not feel like a metonymy at all. Why suggest this is a metonymy and not a metaphor? In line with the comments above, one should be able to see that (a) and (b) are different in an interesting sense: in (b) the predicate, if put in inverted commas, appears like an **interpretively** used expression:

'she is "the pretty face"'

but in (a):

'she is "a pretty face"'

when put in inverted commas, the expression 'a pretty face' appears to be used **descriptively** and the inverted commas implicate something along the lines of 'she is 'a pretty face', to put it metaphorically'. => it would be more reasonable to say that (b) is a case of metonymy and (a) a metaphor.

Similarly:

'The kettle is boiling' [from the examples we found in our search on boiling]
=>

'water is "the kettle"'

but

? 'water is a kettle'.

The author's confusion and **difficulty to tell between referential metaphors and metonymies** is also obvious in an example borrowed from L & J by Otono (2001). Very strong empirical intuition would register the utterance

'*There is the pig waiting*', [said of a rude and offensive customer]

as a metaphor. There is nothing about it really that would make one say it is metonymic. But Otono (2001: 2) suggests this is a case of metonymy.

☑ L & J (1980:35-36) and Radden & Kovesces (p.8): I have a problem with some of their examples of **synecdoche**.

They take the following to be a case of *part-whole relationship*:

'Strong bodies' for *strong people*
'Good heads' for *intelligent people*

and propose: '*[here] we use the part (head) for the whole (person)*' (1980:36).

But the *head* is not part of the *person*! It is part of the *body*.

☑ Cases that we treat as separate phenomena e.g. **lexical narrowing, neologisms etc are seen as metonymies**. In Radden & Kovesces (p.2, 8) 'mother' used to mean STEREOTYPICAL HOUSEWIFE MOTHER or cases such as 'you are speeding again' used to mean YOU ARE GOING TOO FAST or neologisms such as 'they boy *porched* the newspaper' are treated as metonymies.

☑ Generally it is hard to see how an account which takes any relation that could be accommodated within the very general formula **X for Y** as metonymic (so, words **for** concepts, concepts **for** things in the world, words **for** things in the world, red traffic light **for** STOP and so on and so forth), [Lakoff and Turner (1989), Radden & Kovesces] could be anything less than a theory of... nearly everything. Such a view of metonymy clearly over-generates and one has to start with peeling away all those phenomena which are irrelevant to the study of metonymy in order to be left with a core of truly metonymic cases.

☑ In **Panther & Thornburg** the same comments apply with 2 at least additional problems: 1) on p.3 they claim that to them 'inference' is no different to 'memory activation spreading'. Their aim in this paper is to propose an intermediate 'inferential' stage based on conceptual metonymy somewhere between decoding and inference (as meant by other Pragmaticians whom they allegedly counter-argue) **without** really having a **theory of inference at all**.

Secondly, they propose that metonymy is not only referential but also predicational ('the president was brief', => 'the president *spoke briefly*' and not '*the president's speech* was brief') and illocutionary: here they speak of *constructionally coerced metonymies* (where a *stative predicate* stands for an *action predicate*: 'be wealthy in 10 months' stands for the action predicate 'take action that will result in the state of being wealthy in 10 months') and *lexically coerced metonymies* (in which case all indirect speech acts are seen as metonymic. Hence, a directive such as 'Enjoy your holiday' is used for a wish: 'Speaker S expresses the wish that H will enjoy their holiday').