

# Metonymy

## Part 2

### Synopsis of our main assumptions so far and few questions for further discussion

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Our meetings during the first term focused mainly on the following question:

From the range of cases treated as linguistic metonymies in the cognitive linguistic literature which do we want to acknowledge as metonymic?

We sketched a picture along the following lines:

1. We are not interested in cases that can be accommodated within existing and already well defined in RT phenomena such as: *narrowing*, *metaphor*, *neologism* etc and definitely not interested in the alleged 'conceptual' dimension of metonymy.

2. Special attention must be paid to a problematic set of cases which cognitive linguists treat indiscriminately as metonymies but should in fact be treated as *referential metaphors*. I shall come back to that in a bit.

3. Our discussions last term identified another problematic set of allegedly metonymic cases: utterances in which instead of referential metonymy, it seems more likely that we are dealing with a case of loose use of the verb. More specifically, in the set of cases of

**Proper names and definite descriptions used metonymically** the following could be noted:

Compare referential metonymies such as:

(A)

*The White House tried to avoid the scandal.*  
*The ham sandwich didn't pay the bill.*  
*The saxophone...*  
*The free ticket to the opera...*

With cases such as

(B)

*Nixon bombed Hanoi.*  
*Wellington won the Waterloo.*  
*Bill hit John.*

As it was suggested in one of our meetings, the latter **possibly are not referential metonymies** (contrary to their standard treatment in the cognitive linguistic literature i.e. > 'Nixon' for the *pilots who actually bombed Hanoi*, 'Wellington' for the *soldiers who fought in Waterloo*, 'Bill' for *Bill's fist that actually hit John*) but **loose uses of the pertinent verbs**.

Taking into account Nunberg's anaphoric tests, I am thinking that the 'loose use of the verb' approach might explain the difference in anaphora between the following utterances better than the pre-theoretical discussion on '**conceptual prominence**' used by Panther and

Thornburg (2004). So, instead of trying to find ways to squeeze both sets of cases -i.e. (A) and (B)-under the term metonymy maybe we should abandon the one set -i.e. (B)- as non metonymic altogether.

So compare cases such as:

*Nixon bombed Hanoi and then had lunch with his counsellors*  
*?Nixon bombed Hanoi and then had lunch with their fellow pilots*

where anaphora indicates that Nixon is actually referring to Nixon (=> no *deferred reference* here, to use Nunberg's term) and utterances such as:

*The White House tried to avoid the scandal, still (it/ they) completely messed up in the press conference*  
*?The White House tried to avoid the scandal around the same time that it was getting refurbished*

*The sax didn't come to the performance because he had a cold*  
*?The sax didn't come to the performance even though it had been repaired the week before*

where anaphora indicates that *The White House* or *The sax* is actually referring to *The White House representative(s)* or *The sax player respectively* (=>deferred reference) and hence, seem more like genuine cases of metonymy.

Question:

\* Do we want to generalize then and say that the examples we are interested in should have the element of deferred reference, and that the utterances in which reference is not deferred in fact involve **loose use** of the verb rather than **referential metonymy**?

On this basis, cases such as: **'the kettle is boiling'** or 'boiling mud pools' which we treated last year as metonymic are not in fact metonymic because reference is not deferred:

The kettle is boiling and water is trickling from the small crack at its side  
? The kettle is boiling and evaporates quickly

Also, early on in our literature search it became apparent that the cognitive linguistic literature does not have a way to pin down the cut of point between **referential metonymy** and **referential metaphor** and consequently, confuses them.

We compared cases such as:

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]

and remarked that L & J 's (1980) approach treats (1) and (3) as distinct phenomena but does not capture at all the difference between (2) and (3). Now, note that both 2 and 3 involve the element of **deferred reference**. However, deferred reference in (2) is based on loose (and potentially it could also be 'emergent') resemblance/similarity and in (3) on **contingency**. In (2) we say that the denotation of ROSE is broadened to ROSE\* to include fragile and sensitive persons. **In (3) the use of 'rose' to refer a girl holding a rose is a contingent fact**. If she were holding a banana she would be referred to as 'the banana'.

Questions:

What do we want to say that happens to the concept ROSE in the metonymic case?

Do we want to say that **metonymy** should have the element of deferred reference **by contingency** and that the utterances in which deferred reference is by resemblance/similarity involve **referential metaphor** instead?

\*The difference in anaphoric behaviour in the above examples has been pointed out both  
a) by **Panther and Thornburg (2004)**, who propose that both cases are genuinely metonymic and explains the incongruity in terms of a pre-theoretical and blurry notion of 'conceptual prominence' and  
b) by **Nunberg (1995)** who treats these cases as instances of 'distinct linguistic processes of meaning transfer' that correspond to the same broader (metonymic or metaphorical) 'conceptual schema', say, X for Y. => both cases mentioned above would be genuinely metonymic but while the first set of examples would thus be treated as a case of '**deferred reference**' (in terms of the linguistic processes taking place for the metonymy to take off the ground), the second would be a case of '**predicate transfer**'.

When it comes to cases the Cognitive linguists treat as

**Indexicals used metonymically** (some instances of indexical reference are treated in the cognitive linguistic literature as referential metonymies e.g. Nunberg 1995:1-2), I have the following to note:

a) first, in those examples where the referent of the indexical is not deferred why say that we have a case of metonymy in the first place? Why not a case of loose use of the verb? Why is the following example different from the one about Nixon bombing Hanoi?

*I am parked out back*

?*I am parked out back and may not start*<sup>1</sup>

'I' refers to the speaker and not the car (=>**metonymic or not?**)

b) in those examples where the referent of the indexical is according to Nunberg deferred:

*This (while ostensibly raising the car key) is parked out back*

*This (while ostensibly holding the car key) is parked out back and may not start*<sup>2</sup>

?*This (while ostensibly holding the car key) fits only the left front door is parked out back.*

(**metonymic or not?**)

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<sup>1</sup> (the examples here are borrowed from Nunberg 1995:1-2)

<sup>2</sup> „

OK, I am a bit confused here; why say there is anything metonymic about them and not assume that we are just dealing with standard problems of assigning the value of indexicals? Is it because of the ostensive gesture that points to the key? Although I understand what Nunberg is trying to suggest here I am not completely sure I understand why this example is metonymy: take another case of indexicality, take the utterance

*'Shall I wait here?'*

( followed by an ostensive gesture, e.g. pointing at/ poking with my finger the desk I am sitting at).

My gesture points to the desk but what 'here' really refers to could according to context be the office, the town etc Why should that be a metonymy?

4. We also concluded that reducing expressions of equation such as:

*She is just a pretty face*

*He is just a forehead*

Are metonymic. See my comments in **Metonymy\_Corpus search1**

?How about then Lakoff and Johnson's (1980):

*He is a strong body ?*

*She is a good head/brain ?*

Or something along the lines of:

*My heart broke*

### **Systematic ambiguity (or Polysemy as in Nunberg):**

We discussed:

1. 'I can't stand Picasso' [uttered by a friend of Picasso and referring to the man himself]
2. 'I can't stand Picasso' [referring to Picasso's style]
3. 'I can't stand (the?) Picasso' [referring to a particular Picasso painting in the Gallery]

Maybe a case of metonymy, between, say, a representation of a thing and the thing itself.

As Deirdre suggested in both cases we just use the name of the thing, we don't confuse the 2 concepts, we don't treat the painted representations of angels as part of the set of angels.

Are all the cases Nunberg talks about genuine instances of systematic ambiguity though?

Creator/ creation for instance: why would 'Homer' be systematically ambiguous between the man himself (Creator) and his works (Creation)? Isn't this somewhat different from a case such as 'book' being systematically ambiguous between the content of a book and the physical object?