TOWARDS AN INFERENTIAL ACCOUNT OF METONYMY

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Abstract

Among semiotically-oriented literary critics and theorists, there is
no substantial role for inference in literary interpretation. In its
place has been proposed what they call the metonymic process, the
association of one object with another through their perceptual or
conceptual contiguity. In classical rhetorical theory, metonymy was
defined as the substitution of the name of one thing for the name of
another thing associated with it. In contemporary semiotic literary
theory, metonymy has been extended to account for the cognitive
process by which objects are associated. There is no place for
inference in the semiotic view of communication as a matter of
encoding and decoding; to bridge the gap between what is encoded and
the meanings 'intended' and recovered, semiotic theorists have
proposed association constrained by contiguity. But this process
itself needs to be constrained and the questions of when and why it
takes place addressed. Relevance theory provides the necessary
constraints on this associative process and differentiates it from
inference, which has a more fundamental and general role in literary
interpretation. In this paper I provide a short account of metonymy,
with particular reference to Relevance Theory, and draw a sharp
distinction between this limited 'ornament' and the larger, more
general cognitive strategy of inference.

1. Metonymy

        In modern as well as classical rhetoric, metonymy is a
descriptive category. The definition of metonymy as the substitution
of the name of one thing for the name of another thing with which it
is associated adequately limits the class without providing any
motivation for it. A great many phenomena are bundled into this
figure of speech, from nicknames and slang phrases (often referential
short-cuts) to evocative poetic metonyms which appear to border on
metaphor. For all this, metonymy remains first and foremost a means
of reference, for although the writer may create startling effects
with his substituted name, essentially he is referring to one entity
by naming another [Leech 1984; Scott 1981].
        The standard examples of metonymy demonstrate this. Common
metonyms include 'sail' for 'ship' and 'hands' for 'able-bodied seamen'
in which a part of the whole object substitutes for it; military
metonyms such as 'redcoat' for British soldiers of a century or so
ago and 'leathernecks' for the US Marines are based on the
association of an individual with his dress, as are 'white-collar
worker' for anyone employed in a clerical position, and 'blue-stocking'
for literary ladies. In each case, some isolated aspect of the whole
suffices to identify it, and the association between the objects is of
part to whole. Metonyms which are related by such perceptual
association are often classed as synecdoche - the substitution of the

metaphor, but both clearly refer to one entity or class of entities by naming some related or associated entity.

The classical definition still prevails. In most modern primers of rhetoric the identification of metonymy is based not on a *priori* conditions of spatial, temporal, semantic or conceptual association of the entities named but on surface features of the members of the class. Only when the rhetorician has an instance to interpret can he account for the relationship; he cannot predict ahead of time what pairs of entities may be associated by metonymy, except by appeal to those members of the class with which he is already familiar.

Metonymy, then, is a descriptive, not an explanatory term. Traditionally, it depended on the undefined and unconstrained notion of 'association'. More recently this has been replaced by the term 'contiguity' and the defining conditions for metonymy have been extended to psychological and cognitive processes. This, though presaged in the work of the Prague School of Formalist Criticism, was made explicit by Roman Jakobson in his ground-breaking essays on aphasia and thought.

2.   The metaphoric and metonymic poles'

There had long been proposed two 'poles' of language, based on classical antitheses of practicality and ornament, truth and deviance (Havránek 1964). The two aspects of language were the axis of 'standard' or 'practical' language, the language of propositionality; and the axis of 'poetic' language, the language of fiction, of non-propositionality. Standard language expressed ideas, governed by the rules of logic; poetic language, which 'violated the norm' of the standard language, was essentially metaphorical, positing a logical connection between objects which display no such relationship, and so resisting truth conditions while apparently exploiting them. Jakobson developed this schema into a theory of the different principles of organisation of discourses. He claimed that the content of standard discourses was organised primarily by appeal to semantic, phonetic, spatial or temporal contiguity, and of others ('deviant' or poetic discourses) according to resemblance relations which were almost always semantic or conceptual in motivation (Jakobson 1971).

Jakobson sought to find an explanatory framework for metonymy which might also afford an explanation of that other ubiquitous phenomenon of metaphor. He began with the assumption that it was not the rhetorical classes themselves but their motivation which was important, and that a linguistic theory ought to explain and predict instances of both. For that, the old notion of 'association' was clearly insufficient.

Jakobson was working as a linguist committed to semiotics as the basis for human systems of thought and communication. As a semiotician he necessarily held a 'bipolar' view of all systems of communication. This view was a consequence of his reliance on the standard code model of communication, which posits a system of pairings of messages and signals. The most common schema proposes that the message (the thought of the communicator) is formulated internally in some fashion; it is then encoded into a mutually known system of signs (a semiotic system) and sent to the receiver through a channel by way of a medium (here, language). The task of the

reader is to decode the signal using his knowledge of the systems of signs, and so recover the message which the communicator intended him to receive. Because there is, at least in theory, full recovery of the intended message, the workaday fact of failed communication must be explained as the result not of faults in the schema of semiotics but of flaws in the communicating mechanisms.

Code model communication is a two-value system, excluding the middle possibility: either the message is recovered entirely and correctly or it is not; either the channel is clear or it is not; either the semiotic systems in use are mutually known by both sender and receiver, or they are not. Though this framework has been developed into a theory of subtle complexity in the work of the Formalists, the Structuralists and, most lately, the Deconstructionists, it has never progressed beyond the two-value system to one of more flexibility. Adherence to the binary nature of the code model made inevitable the appearance of a bipolar theory of metonymy and metaphor, that is, discourses are either metonymic or metaphoric.

The central insight of Jakobson's essays, that contiguity is the key diagnostic condition of the figure of metonymy, is useful and possibly correct as a descriptive device: it fails only as an explanatory theory. Although Jakobson strengthened the condition defining metonymy from association to contiguity, he claimed that the motivation for metonymy would most profitably be found in the processes of cognition; consequently he attempted to formulate a psychologically plausible basis for the interaction of the axes of language. Contiguity, as distinguished from resemblance, seemed not only to provide an adequate characterisation of those language uses classified as metonymy, but to open the way for an understanding of the organisation and analysis of whole discourses.

3. Association and contiguity

The most basic objection to 'association' as a condition for classifying relations between objects, as rhetoricians and literary theorists realised, is that any object in the world can be 'associated' with any other. Opposites are associated, as are counterparts, components, and things which our knowledge of the world tells us are habitually aligned. Objects can be associated across time and space; concepts may be linked merely by being uttered in the same breath. Without constraints of some kind, association becomes a condition too inclusive to be meaningful. However, while the replacement of association by contiguity develops a link between the conditions defining metonymy and the psychological processes of thought and discourse, it also reveals problems in the semiotic framework.

Contiguity among mentally represented objects frequently reflects contiguity in the actual world between the objects represented; consequently, there were already possible some notions of what was necessary and sufficient for the condition of contiguity. Objects known to be contiguous in the actual world, such as sails and ships, crowns and kings, hands and human beings, had been recognised from antiquity as being metonymically linked. Synecdoche could, if need be, take the lesser part of spatial and temporal contiguities;

the more abstract contiguities of conceptual relationships, semantic fields and phonetic representations could be covered by the more general class of metonymy proper.

Since the condition seemed to be limited by states of affairs in the actual world, the number of types of contiguity seemed also to be empirically limited. Contiguity in space, time and thought, are the conditions for metonymy. Where referential substitution is based on contiguity of objects in the actual world, the rhetorical device being used is metonymy. If contiguity is extended metaphorically to include cognitive processes, then whole texts can be considered metonymic when the discourse is organised primarily along lines of contiguity.

Following Jakobson, later critics pointed out that contiguity of ideas could be seen as the true cognitive basis for metaphor, thus making metaphor a sub-class of metonymy. According to psycho-analytic theories of literature, metaphor represents a condensation of associated ideas [see Black 1979]. Theorists following this line claimed that the basis for metaphor was in fact a metonymic chain of association, based on conceptual contiguity posited by the writer. By removing the explicit and explicatory metonymic links, the writer condensed a logical sequence to an utterance both resistant to truth conditions and very rich in implied meanings.

4. Metonymy and relevance theory

The central objection to contiguity is the unconstrainedness of the notion. The standard semiotic framework, especially when extended to cognitive processes, offers no solution. However, with relevance theory [Sperber & Wilson 1986] the use of contiguity as a basis for identification of referents is useful and suitably constrained. If metonymy is considered a phenomenon of language use rather than a process that generates discourse or orders knowledge, then the task of motivating the category and explaining its conditions is considerably reduced. In any act of communication, the rational speaker makes manifest to her hearer the assumptions which will allow him to arrive at the correct interpretation of her utterance with the least expenditure of effort. In claiming the attention of the hearer/reader, the speaker/writer demands some expenditure of effort; for it to be worth the hearer/reader's while to undertake this he must assume that he'll thereby achieve an adequate gain in cognitive effects. As the principle of relevance states it, every act of ostensive communication (here, the text) carries a guarantee of its own optimal relevance. The metonymic utterance, like all utterances, relies on the ability of the hearer/reader to arrive at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

The motivation for utterances employing metonymies such as 'bluestocking', 'penpusher'or 'New England weather' (when not referring to the weather in New England), or for the doctor who uses 'bed six' to refer to a patient can now be explained. In all such instances, either the speaker intends to communicate a range of implicatures which make the processing of the indirect reference worthwhile for the hearer, or the reference itself ('Chernobyl was both a disaster

and a warning') is economical, permitting the reader to reach the intended interpretation at less processing cost than would reference to the intended entity. A writer who wants to communicate complex thoughts, which perhaps include emotional or non-propositional content (such as impressions), may choose relatively difficult, indirect, or suggestive utterances. Some metonymic uses, such as the examples above from Milton and Tennyson, fall clearly into this class. The greater effort that interpretation of these may require is offset by the extra effects gained.

While contiguity is a constraining condition on metonymy it is not sufficient, as many things in the world are contiguous without being metonymically related. Contiguity of time, space and concept allow far too wide a range of phenomena into the category of metonymy. Certain objects normally contiguous in the actual world never occur as metonyms for one another. Salt and pepper, for instance, are contiguous physically, temporally, and often conceptually (as expressions such as 'salt and pepper cap' or 'salt and pepper beard' indicate), but it would be eccentric, to say the least, for someone to request or refer to salt by referring to pepper instead.

None of the semiotic approaches to metonymy addresses this issue. Relevance theory, however, predicts that no speaker would refer metonymically to the salt by naming the pepper if what she intended to communicate was the thought that it was desirable to the speaker that the hearer pass her the salt; she would achieve exactly the same communicative result with less effort to the hearer by referring directly to the salt. If, however, she believes that there are extra contextual effects the hearer can derive without incurring unjustifiable processing costs then she may well refer to the salt by naming the pepper instead. For example, if by referring to the salt the speaker implicates that she wants both salt and pepper, then clearly she believes that the hearer will gain access to the concepts of salt and pepper; this conceptual accessibility is doubtless based on conceptual contiguity which is turn is a result of the hearer's knowledge of the world.

Relevance constraints predict that a writer will use a metonym only when she believes that implicating one thing by referring to another will allow the reader to arrive at the intended reference without any unrewarding processing effort. If some extra effort _is_ involved, it will allow the reader to derive a wider range of contextual effects than referring directly to the object would have done.

5. Inference

There remains however, the claim that metonymy is a cognitive strategy for the organisation of discourse. Certainly texts are not necessarily or only communicative, and as the principle of relevance applies only to ostensive communicative acts, there might seem to be grounds for speculating about discourses organised by 'the faculty for combination and contexture' [Jakobson 1971]. But Sperber & Wilson's Relevance is not just a theory of communication; it claims that cognitive processes in general are relevance-directed. Since the recovery of communicative intentions may be only one (though crucial) aspect of understanding a text, any further interpretation, though

not driven by the guarantee of optimal relevance, will nevertheless
be relevance-oriented.

I would claim that the cognitive strategy which literary
theorists have posited as responsible for text organisation is not
due to a 'metonymic pole of language' but is simply the general
cognitive process of inference.   The constant process of forming
representations of the way the world is, assumptions on which
activity and thought are based, may be achieved in a number of ways,
but the key process appears to be non-demonstrative inferential
reasoning which evaluates stimuli by constructing hypotheses about
them, and confirming or disconfirming them.   This general cognitive
process is constrained by the goal of maximising relevance, that is,
of achieving as great a range of cognitive effects as possible for as
little expenditure of processing effort as possible.

Much of the information we receive is not communicated; it
makes manifest no intentions which we are supposed to recover or
interpret.   Relevance theory predicts that in trying to make sense of
the world around us we pay attention only to those stimuli which are
most likely to conform to our aim of maximising relevance.   Unlike
the interpretation of communicated information which has succeeded
(and may well end) as soon as the reader has arrived at the intended
interpretation (the one consistent with the principle of relevance)
the processing of non-ostensive stimuli is not driven by a guarantee
of optimal relevance, and so can continue as long as the individual
believes, consciously or otherwise, that the effects derived from the
processing are adequate for the effort he makes.   Inevitably the
quantification of 'adequate' is impossible, as it is dependent not
only on the cognitive apparatus of each person, but also on his
particular experiences and the way his encyclopaedic knowledge about
the world is organised.

Texts and discourses are ostensive stimuli whose purpose is
arguably communicative.   The first task of the reader is to arrive at
the intended interpretation of the text, that is, to derive an
adequate subset of the assumptions made manifest by the   writer.
Further cognitive effects, not intended by the writer but which the
text itself makes manifest, or which are inferable from the
assumptions made manifest by the text, may greatly extend the
reader's interpretation. Those not-necessarily-intended but manifest
assumptions are arrived at, not primarily by recovering the writer's
intentions but by the general cognitive strategy of inference,
constrained just by the cognitive goal of maximal relevance.   The
difference between those assumptions intended by the writer and
those made manifest to the reader but not intended by the writer is
crucial; the writer succeeds in her communicative act if the reader
recovers an adequate subset of her intended assumptions.   Her
responsibility extends very little further than pointing the reader in
the direction of a range of further cognitive effects; she has no
control over where the idiosyncracies of the reader's cognitive
organisation will lead him.

The error made by literary critics and theorists anxious to
extend notions derived from the study of texts into a scientifically
informed semiotics of the mind has been to postulate a mode of
thought based on contiguity.   Theorists have been led to this
absurdity by the assumption that the code model is the generative

base for all communication and that all aspects of interpretation are
essentially semiotic in nature. Although linguistic phenomena are
encoded, the strategies used in interpretation and the meanings
derived cannot adequately be accounted for under the code model (see
Sperber & Wilson 1986, chapter 1). In order to preserve a semiotic
theory of communication and interpretation, semioticians have been
led to conflate a specific figure of speech, metonymy, with the
universal, general cognitive process of non-demonstrative inference.

6.   Inference and Metonymy

Semiotic literary theorists have claimed the process of gaining
knowledge by drawing conclusions from evidence depends on contiguity.
Some have advanced the hypothesis that contiguity is a strategy for
organising discourses, while others have gone further, claiming that
perceptual and conceptual contiguities govern both the production and
interpretation of other figures of speech such as metaphor and of
discourse as a whole. Where metonymy is considered to be 'the figure
of thought that posits difference, perceives contiguity, and infers
causality' (Brooke-Rose 1958), the conflation of metonymy and
inference is clearly marked, but the consequences are best seen in
critical works on metaphor and on specific literary texts. In his The
Role of the Reader, Eco identifies contiguity (within a semiotic
system of communication) with inference, and posits the metonymic
process as the 'framework of the (semiotic) code ... upon which is
based the constitution of any semantic field' (Eco 1979). The
hypothesis is illustrated by excerpts from Finnegan's Wake; Joyce's
portmanteau puns are explained as representing 'subjacent chain[s] of
metonymic connections'. However, the notorious interpretative puzzles
of Finnegan's Wake could as easily (and more intelligibly) be thought
of as Joyce making manifest evidence for the kinds of assumptions he
has in mind, making potentially available a huge range of weak
implicatures.   Which ones are actually derived on any particular
interpretation will vary from reader to reader depending on
idiosyncratic characteristics of cognitive makeup.
Other studies exploring this line of argument confirm that
those texts or aspects of texts which critics see as metonymically
informed are those which put the onus of interpretation on the
reader.   A text makes manifest those assumptions and assumption
schemas which the writer believes will allow the reader to arrive at
the intended interpretation: when the text makes weakly manifest a
wide range of assumptions and the writer indicates her unwillingness
to direct the reader to a highly determinate set of assumptions then
she puts the burden of interpretation on his inferential capacity.
Spector (1984), who favours the idea that the metonymic process
underlies the organisation and imagery of some discourses, claims
that Dickens' Hard Times fails in its characterisation of the working-
class characters because the writer 'relies heavily on metonymy'. In
this study, as in others, the notion of contiguity has been extended
according to Jakobson's schema. Spector claims that 'to identify an
invisible quality - character - by a visible exterior is realism's
fundamental metonymy' for 'metonymy is more than a rhetorical figure
used to express knowledge about a person; it is also the process
through which such knowledge is obtained'. There can be little doubt

that the process the critic intends is not metonymy but inference.
If, as is arguably the case, Dickens relies on descriptions of the
surroundings of his working-class characters and concentrates on
their physical attributes instead of expressing their inner life, then
he is providing evidence from which conclusions about them are to be
drawn.   His utterances communicate to us not his attitudes -
although these may be manifest, they are not necessarily among the
set of assumptions he intended to make manifest - but some
assumptions that he believes will allow the reader to form hypotheses
about the workers' characters based on his descriptions of their
living conditions.   The reader is intended to gain access to
assumptions about people who live in such environments, either by
retrieving them from memory or constructing them on the basis of the
evidence given.

   This process by which the reader arrives at the intended set of
assumptions is surely inferential rather than metonymical.   In this
case, as in the others mentioned, the general cognitive processes of
forming hypotheses on the basis of evidence, accessing existing
assumptions and drawing conclusions, replace the ill-defined notion of
metonymic processing.   This notion is unfortunate not only because it
is based on a largely untenable theory of communication, but because
it conflates a particular phenomenon of language use, metonymy, with
the process of inferential reasoning.

7.   Conclusion

   Metonymy is a fact of language use. A metonym picks out one
object by naming another, related to it by their being contiguous in
the world.   The perception and conceptualisation of contiguity -
essentially descriptive in that it defines a class without providing
an explanation for its existence - requires constraint. The semiotic
framework, in which contiguity is supposedly constrained by virtue of
its being a psychological process, proves inadequate to account for
contiguity as a condition for metonymy; in such a framework, the
relation of contiguity is too powerful for the definition of
metonymy, because even objects both actually contiguous in the world
and also mentally associated due to that contiguity may nevertheless
never be appropriately used to refer to each other.   These
difficulties are compounded when, by an extension of the code-model
theory of communication, mental contiguity is held accountable for
the process by which metonymic language use is understood and
discourse is organised.   However the contiguity relation may
adequately characterise the descriptive category of metonymy in a
relevance-theoretic framework: the use and interpretation of metonymy
depends, like cognitive processes in general, on non-demonstrative
inference, constrained by the guarantee of optimal relevance that
accompanies all ostensive stimuli and by the universal search for
maximal relevance.

8. References

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