

**The Power of Non-Literal Language: An Enquiry into the Meaning of Metaphor**

**By:**

**Myles Moscardelli**

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master**

**In**

**Philosophy**

**Carleton University**

**Ottawa, Ontario**

**© 2018**

**Myles Moscardelli**

## Abstract

In this thesis, we will survey and critically analyze the philosophical discourse on metaphor as it has been traditionally defined by three main theories: the pseudo-semantic theory of Max Black, the non-cognitive theory of Donald Davidson, and the pragmatic theory of John Searle. With this critical analysis, we will see how these three philosophers have contributed to our understanding of what metaphors are, what metaphors mean, where the “power” of metaphors lie, and how we can restrict our possible interpretations of a metaphor. From here, we will see how the leading theory in the philosophy of metaphor, Relevance Theory, has attempted to accommodate for the virtues and vices of these three theories and some of the resistance that this theory has been met with.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction...	4
Chapter 2: Max Black...	
Overview...	11
Objections...	15
Virtues...	18
Conclusion...	19
Chapter 3: John Searle...	
Overview...	21
Objections...	28
Virtues...	30
Conclusion...	35
Chapter 4: Donald Davidson...	
Overview...	37
Objections...	54
Virtues...	56
Conclusion...	57
Chapter 5: Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson...	
Overview...	60
Objections...	65
Virtues...	66
Conclusion...	67

Chapter 6: Closing Thoughts...	
Overview...	69
Concluding Remarks...	72
List of Numbered Examples...	75
Bibliography...	77

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Laying the Foreground: An Introduction to a Discourse on Metaphor

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an outline of a particular conversation surrounding metaphor. Specifically, how metaphor was introduced into serious philosophical discourse and how the conversation led to the current leading theories of metaphor. In many ways this work can be considered a history of metaphor; a term which has been aptly described to me as metaphoriography.<sup>1</sup> It is true that metaphor has become something of a multidisciplinary phenomenon. This thesis will focus solely on metaphor from a philosophical perspective, primarily looking at models from within analytic philosophy. As such, it omits discussion of metaphor from various other domains such as rhetoric, linguistics, and cognitive science. Although these domains have greatly impacted our theory of metaphor, our investigation will be steered by a specific philosophical question that seems at least implicit in all of this research. Namely, “Where does the power of metaphor lie?” or “Where does metaphor get its power?”

The scope of this thesis is what I, and others,<sup>2</sup> determine to be the pillar theories of metaphor: Semantic, Pragmatic, Cognitive, and Contextualist—and I take Relevance Theory as paradigmatic. I have taken what seem to be the seminal works for each of these theories as generally reflective of each theory.

#### **Black:**

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Chris Genovesi for offering me this term.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Elisabeth Camp in her dissertation “Saying and Seeing-as: the Linguistic Uses and Cognitive Effects of Metaphor” (2003). See also David Hills’ article on Metaphor in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Hills, David, “Metaphor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

The classical theories of metaphor in analytic philosophy all in one way or another take their point of departure from Max Black's *Metaphor* (1954-1955), and perhaps to a lesser extent, *More About Metaphor* (1962). Although determining timelines is a risky pursuit, it seems generally safe to claim that Black can be credited with introducing metaphor from the realm of literary theory to the realm of serious philosophical discussion.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to peg Black as a semanticist, or his view on metaphor as "semantic," because his view seems so similar to pragmatic views of metaphor; however, at the time he had written his first essay on metaphor, the field of pragmatics was only just taking shape. As a result, a lot of what Black has to say seems in line with what the pragmatists have to say. Nonetheless, Black's objective is to find the linguistic content, or meaning, of metaphor. As such, Black's view will be treated as a semantic view of metaphor.

### **Searle:**

For the pragmatic view, I use John Searle's work *Metaphor*, prefaced with Paul Grice's theory of communication, to lay the ground for pragmatics as they relate to metaphor. Overall, this theory of metaphor appears to contribute what seems to be the most intuitive account of metaphor and metaphorical meaning. Since it follows a well-established theory of language, that of Grice, the pragmatic theory of metaphor seems to have shaped much of how we think and talk about metaphor.

### **Davidson:**

---

<sup>3</sup> When I say "serious," I do not mean to discredit literary theory or treat one discipline as more legitimate, or superior, than the other. Rather, when I say "serious," I mean that the topic of metaphor was previously treated as not something to be taken as a serious topic in philosophical discussion.

For the cognitive view, or what has been called the “brute force” theory of metaphor, I turn to Donald Davidson’s work *What Metaphors Mean* (1978). Davidson was by far the biggest inspiration for this thesis, along with Elizabeth Camp’s *Showing, Telling, and Seeing: Metaphor and Poetic Language* (2008), primarily because of their critical approaches to established theories of metaphor. Beyond that, I find Davidson’s theory to be the most significant contribution to metaphor of the theories I have presented because it breaks the debate out of the traditional pragmatic versus semantic framework. It seems to me that the leading contemporary theory of metaphor has picked up on this quality of Davidson’s work and, as a result, Davidson’s contribution to the conversation of metaphor has been invaluable.

### **Sperber and Wilson:**

The significance of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s deflationary account of metaphor is to provide a contemporary account of metaphor that accommodates for many of the objections against, as well as the contributions of, each theory analyzed before it. For this reason, and for the purposes of this thesis, Relevance Theory acts as a development of the theories analyzed prior to it in that it locates the power of metaphor in multiple areas; specifically, in cognitive effect and pragmatic implicatures. One may stretch to say that the power of metaphor is also located in semantics; however, if one were to make this claim, s/he would have to submit that if Relevance Theory locates any power of metaphor in semantics, it would have to be minimal (perhaps in the rules that govern meaning). Nonetheless, the function of Relevance Theory is just to set the

discourse on metaphor in a contemporary setting and provide some perspective on where we are now.

Overall, my objective with this thesis is to display how traditional and contemporary theories of metaphor “miss the mark.” In other words, it seems to me that the traditional theories of metaphor struggle to create what Max Black calls an “infallible criterion of ‘metaphorhood.’” My inquiry of metaphor has led me to the conclusion that traditional theories of metaphor fail to create an infallible view of metaphor because they attempt to locate the “power” of metaphor on one “level”; namely, on the levels of semantics, pragmatics, or cognitive effects. The leading theory of metaphor that I intend to analyze, Relevance Theory, attempts to reconcile this issue; however, their attempt seems to create some issues that seem too difficult to accept. Therefore, since most of what I have to say on the issue of metaphor is critical, I lean heavily on Davidson’s criticisms of traditional theories of metaphor and Elizabeth Camp’s criticisms of more contemporary views. As a result, the chapters involving works that focus on negative accounts of metaphor—that is, works focused more on putting forward criticisms of established theories of metaphor—have been given much more weight in this work than positive, or more constructive, accounts of metaphor, particularly the chapter on Davidson.

## **Introduction:**

Before we begin, we may ask the question “what is metaphor?” A metaphor is a figure of speech where one thing is understood as something else. English is replete with examples. For instance:

- (1) “Bill is a bulldozer.”
- (2) “Sam is a snake.”
- (3) “Juliet is the sun.”
- (4) “Honour is a mere scutcheon.”

All of the above are examples of the phenomenon under investigation. (1) and (2) are examples of what are typically referred to as conventional metaphors. They are called so because their meaning is obvious, straightforward and does not typically waiver from one context of utterance to another. On the other hand, examples (3) and (4) are poetic metaphors. That is to say, they are evocative, imagistic and open-ended. This means that interpretation has no obvious end point. It is important to keep this distinction in mind as we make our way through each theory. As a rule of thumb, many theorists will begin with paradigmatic cases, such as (1) and (2), and then generalize to include cases like (3) and (4). However, we will see that this does not always work out successfully. One of the most difficult aspects of a theory of metaphor is the ability to account for these two aspects of metaphor.

A second related question we may ask is, why study metaphor? This question relates to the specific power that metaphor has. By power, I am referring to the way metaphor works and how it achieves its effects. This is usually, though not always, captured by the term *metaphorical meaning*.

Putting this into context: imagine that you have procrastinated on finishing an assignment. Knowing that you do not have time to do considerable research, your roommate says:

(5) “Wikipedia is a gold mine.”

There is no doubt that you understand what she is trying to impart. S/he is saying that you can learn as much as you need to in order to complete the assignment. You know that s/he has said, or communicated, this, and not the literal meaning of her utterance—roughly, that Wikipedia is a mass of land, replete with a precious metal, and complete with an excavation crew. Your friend has made a metaphorical statement, which is undoubtable; but it is far from trivial. In fact, just how metaphor achieves the effects it does has been the subject of a long debate in linguistics and the philosophy of language.

Theories of metaphor are classified based on where they identify the mechanism of metaphorical meaning or its effects. We may identify three: semantics, pragmatics, and perlocutionary effects. One major problem with this classificatory system is the problem of the interface between semantics and pragmatics. I will side-step this issue, and for clarity, assume that semantics deals with what is encoded in what is uttered. We may refer to this as conventional meaning. I will also assume that something is semantically encoded if the meaning is independent of context. I will take pragmatics to mean that which is concerned with an act of uttering something in some context, and what is communicated in this act. In this way, we may say that semantics concerns “what is said,” while pragmatics concerns what the speaker *means*.

The following essay will look at four major theories in the field that have attempted to provide distinct answers to the question of the power of metaphor. In so

doing, the paper will evaluate the status of the arguments. By emphasizing the virtues of each of the major theories, the paper also hopes to provide a preliminary account of what an adequate theory of metaphor ought to take into consideration.

The four theorists the paper examines are: Max Black (1954-1955, 1962) who was responsible for treating the power of metaphor as a semantic feature. But this, of course, is not the only way to develop a theory of metaphor. Contra Black, John Searle (e.g., 1979) develops a theory of metaphor that treats it as *speaker meaning*. And contra Searle, Donald Davidson (1978) proposes that both of the previous accounts are misguided. Davidson claims that metaphor can only be understood in terms of the psychological effects that it evokes in its audience. We may call this their perlocutionary effects. Roughly, these are “the further effects which a speaker’s utterance brings about in a hearer.”<sup>4</sup> The final theory of metaphor analyzed in this thesis is the *Deflationary Account of Metaphors* by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (2008) where they propose that metaphor exists on a continuum of meaning determined by how communication is relevant from speaker to hearer—on one end we have narrow concepts of meaning, which we have traditionally labelled as literal meaning, and on the other end we have loose meaning, which we have traditionally labelled as metaphorical meaning.

---

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Camp, 2003; vi.

## Chapter 2: Max Black

### Linguistic Meaning and the System of Associated Commonplaces: A Reconstruction of Traditional Semantic Theories of Metaphor

#### Overview:

A theory of metaphor actually begins with Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, he observed that “[m]etaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on the grounds of analogy” (Aristotle; 21). His last definition of metaphor—a cross domain mapping between two meanings, or semantic fields, understood as analogical mapping—is the sense under which we operate today.

After Aristotle, the study of metaphor was halted. For example, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes considered them to be distractions at best, and deceitful instances of language at their worst. As a result, philosophical discussion regarding metaphor never got underway. In fact, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Aristotle’s insights had begun to be taken seriously.

The first theory on the scene was semantic in nature. A semantic theory of metaphor goes back to I.A. Richard’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) and Max Black’s seminal paper *Metaphor* (1955). Semantic theories of metaphor make the argument that metaphors impart cognitive content that is captured by its metaphorical meaning. Metaphorical meaning is meaning that goes beyond the conventional or encoded meaning of the words in the utterance. This meaning, as we shall see, is the result of a process of *interaction* between two semantic systems.

In his work, *Metaphor*, Max Black introduced metaphor to the canon of “serious thought” by stating: “the questions I should like to see answered concern the ‘logical grammar’ of ‘metaphor’ and words having related meanings” (Black, 1954; 273). This is to say that Black wants to treat metaphor as a serious discipline as one would any other topic in philosophy; that is, to treat metaphor with the same intellectual honesty as one would with literal statements. Previously, and with some lingering contemporary bias (confined, as the dictum goes, to the pragmatic dustbin), figurative language has not seen very much attention until very recently. To illustrate what I mean, Black points out in his essay, that it has been an intellectual imperative that “thou shalt not commit metaphor” (Black, 1954; 273). Black attempts to rectify this bias by approaching metaphor, and figurative language more generally, with the sense of intellectual curiosity that the topic has been missing.

Following Black, we may ask a basic question concerning metaphor: “what is the point of using a metaphor or, more briefly, ‘what do we *mean* by ‘metaphor?’” (Black, 1954; 273). In other words, what is the *content* of a metaphor? Although this primary question guides his inquiry, they are too rich, or too big, to answer. However, Black knows this and he addresses it himself. In spite of willingly biting off more than he can chew, Black carves out an interesting theory that one ought to take seriously.

In addressing the central question—“what are metaphors?”—Black suggests that we should be careful not to assume that we will find some infallible criterion of “metaphor-ness.” This enterprise is doomed to failure—any criterion one cares to suggest can be shown to break down under certain circumstances (Ortony, 1993; 5). In spite of this, Black goes on to claim that his objective is to: defend the implausible contention that

metaphorical statements can sometimes generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designated (the principle and subsidiary subjects) (Ortony, 1993; 35). To make this defense, Black introduces (what one may conveniently refer to as) the “interaction view” of metaphor. We call a view of metaphor “interactionist” if it maintains the following:

1. A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, to be identified as the “primary” subject and the “secondary” one.
2. The secondary subject is to be regarded as a system rather than an individual thing.
3. The metaphorical utterance works by “projecting upon” the primary subject a set of “associated implications,” comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject.
4. The maker of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject’s implicative complex.
5. In the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the two subjects “interact” in the following ways: (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject’s properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject (Black, 1962; 27-28).

To illustrate these five steps, take, for example, the statement that Black analyzes:

(6) “Man is a wolf.”

This sentence contains two subjects: the literal *principal subject* (“man”) and the figurative *subsidiary, or secondary, subject* (“wolf”). The secondary subject, “wolf, contains within it “a set of ‘associated implications,’” or “*a system of associated commonplaces,*” which is projected upon the primary subject, “man.” We may think of these commonplaces as stereotypical properties that are inherent in a concept. From this example, Black goes on to explain his system of associated commonplaces as follows:

Imagine some layman required to say, without taking special thought, those things he held to be true about wolves; the set of statements resulting would approximate to what I am here calling the system of commonplaces associated with the word “wolf.” I am assuming that in any given culture the responses made by different persons to the test suggested would agree rather closely, and that even the occasional expert, who might have unusual knowledge of the subject, would still know “what the man in the street thinks about the matter”. From the expert’s standpoint, the system of commonplaces may include half-truths or downright mistakes (as when a whale is classified as a fish); but the important thing for the metaphor’s effectiveness is not that the commonplaces shall be true, but that they should be readily and freely evoked. (Black, 1954; 287)

Black argues: literal uses of the word “wolf” are governed by syntactic and semantic rules, which, if violated, produces nonsense or self-contradiction: “this idea of a wolf is part of a system of ideas, not sharply delineated, and yet sufficiently definite to admit of detailed enumeration” (Black, 1954; 288). Black concludes by saying, the effect of calling “man” a “wolf” is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. A competent hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject.

Black posits that, although understanding a metaphor involves understanding word meaning, metaphor consists of “shifts in the meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical expression” (Black, 1954; 78) and suggests that a word being used metaphorically acquires an extended sense (Black, 1954; 190); namely, his system of associated commonplaces. That is, metaphorical meanings are

generated based on deleting selection restrictions of semantic features (connotations, which are components of literal meanings).

In simpler terms, take another example:

(7) “Brenda is a Saint.”

When one utters “Brenda is a Saint,” the speaker evokes an understanding of “Saints” that is shared with the hearer. This shared understanding, or “system of associated commonplaces,” frames the hearers understanding of “Brenda” and, from that shared understanding, the listener applies the attributes of a Saint to Brenda. From this, one can then share in the speaker’s understanding that “Brenda can do no wrong,” “Brenda always means well,” and, perhaps even, “Brenda is an example of a good person.”

We may formalize this characterization a bit. Restricting investigation to the subject/predicate structure, we can represent a metaphor as: “A is B.” What Black adds to our understanding is the idea that when an utterance is identified as a metaphor, the literal meaning of “A” *interacts* ( $\vartheta$ ) with “B” resulting in a new *metaphorical* meaning ( $M_{met}$ ) of “B” which is predicated of “A”. So, we may represent a metaphorical utterance as:

“A  $\vartheta$  B” which gives as output  $M_{met}$ .

### **Objections:**

As Black expected, his theory of “metaphor-ness” is not without its faults. One issue with the interactionist theory of metaphor is that he fails to specify exactly how we arrive at such a system. For example, if one utters (2), it is unclear how one arrives at the snake-system of related commonplaces that the speaker evokes and how they relate to Sam. To answer this question, it seems that Black would have to claim that these systems

of associated commonplaces are constructed through convention, or a set of associated ideas and beliefs which are common to a community and cause an intellectual domain for the object being used in the metaphor. This is to say, when one utters (2), one draws upon understandings of snake-ness that are constructed through convention. Moreover, these conventional meaning of snake-ness “frame,” or “filter,” the hearer’s understanding of Sam. However, even if this is the case, Black still owes an account of 1) how these conventions are constructed, and 2) how, at the level of semantics, the hearer picks up on these conventional meanings. Overall, by referring to this system of associated commonplaces, Black seems to show that when one produces a metaphor, one causes one’s hearer to draw on a shared concept and treat that concept as the lens of interpretation of that metaphorical utterance. To claim that this all happens at the level of semantics (and not at the levels of, say, pragmatics or some cognitive level) is to overburden the semantics of a metaphorical utterance. Save for Black’s argument that all of this *seems* to happen at the level of semantics, this view *seems* to look a lot like contemporary pragmatic views of metaphor—i.e., the relevance theory arguments put forward by Sperber and Wilson in their deflationary account of metaphors.

Another issue with Black’s theory of metaphor is that it can account for simple, or conventional, metaphors, but not “novel” metaphors, also known as poetic, literary, or unconventional metaphors. This is to say that Black’s interactionist account of metaphor provides a good understanding for metaphors that take the form “X is [a] Y,” for example,

(8) “Nic is a lion.”

Or

(9) “Nic is a tank.”

But it does not provide any meaningful understanding of a metaphor like:

(10) “Those images that yet/Fresh images beget,/That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.”<sup>5</sup>

Trying to apply the interactionist view to a metaphor like this seems fruitless because it does not take the form “X is [a] Y.” One would have to begin by determining what object of the metaphorical utterance to frame *and* what to frame it with. Perhaps one could say that the “images” that Yeats refers to is the object to be framed and the “dolphin-torn [...] gong-tormented sea” is the frame. In this case, one would have to invoke the system of associated commonplaces around a “dolphin torn [...] gong-tormented sea” and apply those features to said “images;” however, 1) it is not clear that such commonplaces exist, and 2) if such a commonplace does exist, it is not clear how it could act as a frame. Therefore, novel metaphors pose a problem for the interactionist view of metaphor because they do not seem to carry a system of associated commonplaces, or such a system is not so clearly applied.

A similar, *possible* objection to the interactionist view of metaphor concerns *novel*, new, metaphors. If one uttered a new, unconventional metaphor, such as

(11) “Ottawa is battery acid.”

It is unclear how a system of associated commonplaces around battery acid would apply to a place, or even a person. Maybe we can arrive at some type of system by explaining that battery acid is corrosive and, by uttering (11), one could be saying that Ottawa is corrosive and, by extension, it wears you down. Then, by using the interactionist view, one can come to some meaningful understanding of a new metaphor; however, only with

---

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats, “Byzantium” (1933).

some explanation can one arrive at some shared system that could act as a frame for Ottawa. Therefore, new metaphors seem to pose a problem for the interactionist theory because, for new metaphors, we do not have a shared system of associated commonplaces.

### **Virtues:**

One of the virtues of Black's interaction view is that, in his attempt to reduce metaphorical meaning down to the semantic propositional content of an utterance, he shows how knowledge beyond linguistic, or sentence, meaning is necessary. Specifically, since Black's system of associated commonplaces requires the hearer to draw upon what Grice would call the conventional implicatures of an utterance in a metaphorical sentence, it is evident that one must draw on content beyond the mere semantic, or linguistic, level; that is, meaning without intended, speaker meaning.

An additional virtue of Black's interactionist theory is how the linguistic content of a metaphor can inform, or restrict, the meaning of a metaphor. This can be seen mainly in Black's third step: "The metaphorical utterance works by 'projecting upon' the primary subject a set of 'associated implications,' comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject" (Black, 1962; 28). Here, Black identifies that the secondary object has a set of predicates that can possibly relate to the primary subject. This appears to stop speakers from uttering metaphor with a seemingly infinite breadth of possible meanings, while still maintaining a seemingly infinite depth of meaning. For example, when one utters (2) it would seem impossible that one could mean that Sam is soft, inviting, etc. and if one does mean it this way, it seems impossible for a

hearer to intuitively pick up on this meaning of “snake” that the speaker is invoking.<sup>6</sup> The number of qualities that one could possibly pick out of any number of snakes and how one could possibly attribute those qualities upon someone (for example, Sam) seems infinite.

I should note, it is unclear whether Black would make this assertion himself. It seems like Black’s theory requires that we broaden the conception of literal meanings to include anything and everything that can be used to form a metaphor. So, this “virtue” seems to be more a virtue of semantic approaches to understanding metaphor, rather than a virtue of Black’s approach to understanding metaphor. An example of this “general semantic theory” can be seen when Johnathan Cohen and Avishai Margalit write that the metaphorical meanings of natural language are "contained, as it were, within the literal meaning or meanings. They are reached by removing any restrictions in relation to certain variables from the appropriate section or sections of its semantical hypothesis” (Davidson and Hartman, 2012; 735).

### **Conclusion:**

Overall, Black’s view of metaphor seems to present a good start for arriving at a theory of metaphor. The interactionist view provides a very good, intuitive method for approaching conventional metaphors. Black’s view provides a strong case of how a theory of metaphor requires extended meanings. However, the simplicity of this theory is also this theory’s downfall. Specifically, as a *semantic* theory of metaphor, it seems that Black’s position is a bit overstated. That is to say, Black has bitten off more than he could

---

<sup>6</sup> Unless, of course, the speaker uttered the metaphor ironically, and so intended the opposite of their metaphorical utterance. For a fuller treatment on metaphor-irony compounds, see Poppa-Wyatt (2017).

chew trying to claim that all of the steps required for the interactionist view of metaphor happens solely at the level of semantics.

An important historical note in Black's favour is that semantics is all he had to work with at the time he proposed the interactionist view of metaphor in 1954. Since Grice's philosophy of conversation, or theory of pragmatics (which will be talked about in the following chapter), was not published until 1967, it seems that even if pragmatics did exist during the time that his paper *Metaphor* was published, it was not an entirely tenable position to hold in the philosophy of language. As a result, Black had no choice but to overburden his semantics of metaphor with features that could be accounted for by pragmatics because he had no legitimate alternative. With this in mind, it seems like Black's concept of a system of associated commonplaces comes as close to accounting for this particular flaw in his theory that he could at the time.

### Chapter 3: John Searle

#### Metaphor and Implicatures: The Parallels Between Metaphor and Conversational Implicatures Shown in the Works of Paul Grice and John Searle

##### Overview:

Unlike the semantic theories that came before, pragmatic theories of meaning locate the power of metaphor in what is referred to as *speaker meaning* and not at the level of the encoded content. Before reconstructing John Searle's theory of metaphor, I believe it is necessary to provide an account for Gricean pragmatics<sup>7</sup> because Searle's view leans so heavily on it. The foundation that Searle builds off of is a system of communication constructed by the philosopher Paul Grice. For Grice, there is a distinction between linguistic meaning—either what one literally says when one uses words or the word meanings themselves—and what a speaker means, or communicates, by using these words. For example, with a metaphor, if one says,

(12) "I'm freezing."

The speaker says his or her core temperature is reaching zero degrees Celsius or lower; however, what the speaker means, or communicates, is that s/he is simply feeling cold. In other words, for Grice, *what is said* is that the speaker's core temperature is reaching zero degrees, but what the speaker conveys or implicates—the *conversational implicature*—is that s/he feels cold. The nature of Grice's pragmatic theory of conversation hinges on distinguishing between "what is said" and the "implicatures" within, or what is implicated beyond, an utterance. Therefore, Grice's "what is said" may be understood as

---

<sup>7</sup> I owe much of my understanding and reconstruction of Grice's theory of communication to Kapa Korta and John Perry's work in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Korta, Kapa and Perry, John, "Pragmatics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) Web.

conventional linguistic meaning and “implicatures” may be understood as the “extralinguistic” meaning, or the meaning beyond the linguistic meaning, communicated within his or her utterance.

For Grice, implicatures are associated with some rational principles and maxims that govern conversation. The principle governing conversation that Grice has in mind is called the “Cooperative Principle,” which he asserts consists of: “[Making] your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1967/1989; 26). Grice continues to explain that this Cooperative Principle is a set of four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Korta and Perry clearly articulate the meanings of these maxims:

The maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), do not make your contribution more informative than is required; the maxim of quality: (supermaxim) try to make your contribution one that is true, (submaxims) do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence; the maxim of relation: be relevant; the maxim of manner: (supermaxim) be perspicuous, (submaxims) avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), be orderly, and frame whatever you say in the form most suitable for any reply that would be regarded as appropriate; or, facilitate in your form of expression the appropriate reply (added by Grice 1981/1989, 273).

According to Korta and Perry, “Grice sees the principles governing conversation as derived from general principles governing human rational cooperative action.” They continue, “Grice attributes to these principles an essential role for the definition and the interpretation of conversational implicatures” (Korta and Perry, 2015).

It is important to note that there is more than one type of implicature; rather, there are three: 1) conventional implicatures, 2a) generalized conversational implicatures, and

2b) particularized conversational implicatures. As Korta and Perry claim, according to Grice, all three types of implicatures follow a pattern:

[The speaker] has said that  $p$ ; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the [Cooperative Principle]; he could not be doing this unless he thought that  $q$  is *required*; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that  $q$ ; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think that  $q$ ; and so he has implicated that  $q$ . (Grice, 1967a/1989; 31)

For example, if one utters to me

(13) “Donald Trump is a politician, but he’s honest.”

It seems that the speaker has implicated that politicians are not generally honest; at the very least, the speaker has allowed me to think that politicians are not generally honest, even though they may not have said or intended us to think this. Therefore, there are multiple types of implicatures and all of them follow this form.

Grice then outlines three characteristics of conversational implicatures: they are cancellable, they are non-detachable, and they are calculable. First, to say that a conversational implicature is always cancellable is to say that one can always deny a particular meaning is implied. Specifically, Grice explains what it means to say that conversational implicatures are cancellable when he asserts:

...a putative conversational implicature that  $p$  is explicitly cancellable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that  $p$ , it is admissible to add but not  $p$ , or I do not mean to imply that  $p$ , and it is contextually cancellable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature. (Grice 1967a/1989, 44)

This is to say, for example, if one asks me if I would like a coffee and I respond by saying “I’m having tea,” I implicate that I would not like coffee. However, this implicature is cancellable because I could say, “I’m having tea, but I would also like

coffee.” This is what it means to say that a conversational implicature is cancellable. Therefore, conversational implicatures are always cancellable.

Second, to say that conversational implicatures are non-detachable is to claim that there is no way one could say the same thing. Grice explains this when he states:

...it will not be possible to find another way of saying the same thing, which simply lacks the implicature in question, except where some special feature of the substituted version is itself relevant to the determination of an implicature (in virtue of one of the maxims of manner). (Grice 1967a, 1989; 39)

What Grice is expressing here is that the same propositional content in the same context always gives rise to the same conversational implicature, however it is expressed. This is to say, for example, when I respond to the question “would you like some coffee” by saying “I’m having tea,” there is propositional content, and there are numerous ways to express it: “I am enjoying a cup of tea,” “I’m having tea right now,” or even “I’m drinking tea.” To emphasize, the propositional content is the same. Therefore, conversational implicatures are non-detachable.

Finally, to claim that conversational implicatures are calculable is to say that it can be figured out; that is, an extended meaning can be arrived at. Grice explains this by asserting:

The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature. (Grice 1967a/1989; 31)

Calculability refers to the specific way in which a hearer will arrive at the implicature via certain facts about the meaning of the sentence uttered by the speaker and the context of the utterance. Moreover, Korta and Perry emphasize that the feature of calculability is how Grice distinguishes between conversational and conventional implicatures; they go on to identify conventional implicatures as: “generated by the meaning of certain

particules like ‘but’ or ‘therefore’” (Korta and Perry 2015). Take, for example (14) and (15):

(14) “Donald Trump is a politician; therefore, he is honest.”

(15) “Donald Trump is a politician, and he is honest.”

Korta and Perry explain that for Grice, a speaker has *said* the same thing with (14) and (15); however, the difference is that (14) implicates (16):

(16) “Donald Trump’s being honest follows from his being a politician.”

Overall, this is what defines a conventional implicature. Specifically, what makes conventional implicatures unique from conversational implicatures is that they are not governed by maxims so much as the conventional meanings of “certain particles,” in this case “therefore,” which carry the meaning of the utterance beyond Grice’s “what is said.”

It is important to note that Black’s terminology predates Grice’s now famous notion of conversational implicatures. Although there seems to be a lot of overlap, Black’s account lacks the flexibility, and context sensitivity, that pragmatics is attuned to. Something counts as a conversational implicature if it is cancellable. Recall that semantics is the field concerned with stable, encoded content. Consequently, Black’s commitment to a semantic approach holds that the *metaphorical meaning* happens at the level of semantics. As such, the metaphorical meaning is not cancellable, but is in some significant way “lodged in the words” (to borrow a phrase from Elisabeth Camp). That is to say, the content of a metaphorical utterance cannot be cancelled.

Consider the following exchange:

(17) “Lawyers are snakes.”

(18) “No they’re not, some are good people!”

On Black's account, the hearer puts together  $M_{\text{met}}$  as a part of the semantics of  $\vartheta$  between the subject and predicate. This renders cancelability impossible. Thus, the following retort is infelicitous:

\*(19) "No, I meant that they can change, like, shed their skin."

In his paper, *Metaphor*, Searle asks the question: "How is it possible for a speaker to say metaphorically 'S is P' and mean 'S is R,' when P plainly does not mean R; furthermore, how is it possible for the hearer who hears the utterance 'S is P' to know that the speaker means 'S is R'?" (Searle, 1979; 102). His short answer: "the utterance P calls to mind the meaning and, hence, the truth conditions associated with R, in special ways that metaphorical utterances have of calling things to mind. However, Searle believes, like Black, that there is no *single* principle on which metaphor works (Searle, 1979; 102)

Searle begins his discussion of metaphorical utterances and how they differ from literal utterances. In the case of literal utterances speaker's meaning and sentence meaning are the same; therefore, the assertion made about the object referred to will be true if, and only if, it satisfies the truth conditions determined by the meaning of the general term as applied against a set of background assumptions (Searle, 1979; 89). However, to understand metaphorical utterances, the hearer requires something more than his knowledge of language, his awareness of conditions of the utterance, and background assumptions that s/he shares with the speaker. S/he must have some other principles, some other information, or some combination of principles and information that enables him/her to figure out that when the speaker says, "S is P" s/he means "S is R" (Searle, 1979; 89).

Searle holds that if we can figure out the principles according to which hearers understand metaphorical utterances, we shall be a long way towards understanding how it is possible for speakers to make metaphorical utterances, because for communication to be possible, speakers and hearers must share a common set of principles (Searle, 1979; 102). As a result, Searle presents three steps that a hearer must go through to understand a metaphorical utterance:

First: s/he must have some strategy for determining whether s/he must seek a metaphorical interpretation of the utterance in the first place.

Second: when s/he has decided to look for a metaphorical interpretation, s/he must have some set of strategies, or principles, for computing possible values of R.

Third: s/he must have a set of strategies, or principles, for restricting the range of R's—for deciding which R's are likely to be the ones the speaker is asserting of S (Searle, 1979; 103).

Take, for example, the utterance:

(20) "Sam is a pig."

If one hears this metaphor, s/he knows that that utterance cannot literally be true. If one tries to take it literally, it is radically defective. This suggests a strategy that underlies the first step: "where the utterance is defective, if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning" (Searle, 1979; 103). Searle goes on to say, once our hearer has established that s/he is to look for an alternative meaning, he has *several* principles by which he can compute possible values of R. One of them:

When you hear "S is P" to find possible values of R look for ways in which S might be like P, and to fill in the respect in which S might be like P, look for salient, well known, and distinctive features of P things. (Searle, 1979; 103)

In this case, according to Searle, the hearer might invoke his/her factual knowledge to come up with such features as that pigs are fat, gluttonous, slovenly, filthy, etc. However, lots of other features of pigs are equally distinctive and well known; for example, pigs have a distinctive shape and distinctive bristles. Therefore, the hearer needs to go through the third step where s/he restricts the range of possible R's: "go back to the S term and see which of the many candidates for the values of R are likely or even possible properties of S" (Searle, 1979; 104).

Following Grice, Searle distinguishes sentence meaning, or semantic meaning, from speaker meaning, or pragmatic meaning. As Searle argues, metaphor can never possibly be true and never makes sense on at the literal, semantic level. However, on the level of intended, or speaker, meaning, a metaphorical utterance can make sense and, moreover, can be true. For this reason, Searle locates the power of metaphor in the intended, pragmatic meaning.

### **Objections:**

I believe one of the biggest drawbacks is the veil that obscures the pragmatic processes specific to interpretation of metaphors. Specifically, the process does not distinguish metaphor from other figurative tropes, implicatures, or indirect speech acts.

Secondly, an important objection to Searle, which seems consistent with the objections posed against Black, and the pragmatists in general, is that although one can derive speaker meaning to make sense of simple metaphors like (20), this does not seem to hold for novel metaphors. For example, take the line from *Macbeth*:

(21) "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets/his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more."

This metaphor is difficult to decode both on the semantic and the pragmatic levels. This is to say that it is unclear what is being expressed. Although Searle anticipates this objection by claiming, “a model designed to account for the simple cases should prove of more general application,” it is not obvious that his pragmatic account of metaphor can possibly accommodate novel metaphors like the one above (Searle, 1979; 102).

A third objection against Searle comes in the form of twice-true and twice-apt metaphors. With twice-true and twice-apt metaphors, both the literal and metaphorical meanings of an utterance are true; namely, that they both have truth-value. That is to say, the literal meaning in these cases is not false, and although a springboard to entertain further implicatures, the falsity of the literal is not enough to explain why the audience is prompted to search for another (metaphorical) meaning. However, when a metaphor is twice-true, the literal meaning of the utterance is *trivially* true, whereas the metaphorical utterance has a significant meaning. For example, the utterance,

(22) “No man is an island.”

is trivially true because no person is literally a mass of land surrounded by water. So, the statement is literally true; so, we assume the speaker is trying to communicate something *more*. Perhaps it is an admonishment against individualism, or living a solitary lifestyle. On the other hand, when a metaphor is twice-apt, the literal and metaphorical meanings of an utterance are significantly meaningful. For example, when one utters

(23) “Jesus was a carpenter.”

The literal meaning, Jesus made and repaired wooden structures, is significantly meaningful in a biographical sense. Moreover, the metaphorical meaning, Jesus mended broken souls, is both true and significant.

The final objection against Searle is that he gives no account as to how one comes to know these extended meanings of metaphorical utterances.<sup>8</sup> For example, it is not clear how, when a speaker utters a metaphor like

(24) “The world is a vampire.”

A hearer can pick up on a possible extended meaning. It just seems to be something that Searle takes for granted; namely, that we do say “P” and understand “R.” Perhaps he holds it without ever asserting it, but Searle’s theory can resolve this issue by adopting something like Black’s system of associated commonplaces. For example, Searle can hold that the speaker and hearer have a common understanding of vampires and understand what qualities of vampires apply to “the world” in such a way as to arrive at a common understanding of the utterance “the world is a vampire.” The way that Searle could differ from Black while holding the system of associated commonplaces is through denying that the system of associated commonplaces is a linguistic, or semantic, phenomenon and, as a result, Searle would not fall into the same pitfalls as Black by overburdening semantics. Rather the system of associated commonplaces could be a cognitive phenomenon, or maybe in some way a pragmatic one.

### **Virtues:**

A benefit of Searle’s pragmatic theory is that it treats metaphor as a two-step process, as opposed to Black’s one-step process. Black treats metaphor as a one-step phenomenon by understanding the meaning of a metaphor as the interaction between core

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that this is unlike the objection against Max Black because Black owes us an account of how we arrive at the system of associated commonplaces, whereas Searle owes us an account of how we arrive at extended meanings. If Searle adopted Black’s system of associated commonplaces, we would have an account for how we arrive at extended meanings, but we would still require an account of how we arrive at the system itself.

and stereotypical properties associated with the secondary subject, and the primary subject. This seems to overburden the semantics of a metaphor because it is unclear that all of this can happen on the level of semantics alone. Searle's two-step process consists of 1) recognizing the lack of literal meaning of a metaphor, and 2) searching for the metaphorical, speaker meaning and restricting the range of that meaning to what is relevant to the speaker's intentions, or, as Searle puts it, what "a speaker means *by* uttering the words, sentences, and expressions" they do (Searle, 1979; 84). The meaning of a metaphor, then, is divided into the cognitive effects of a sentence or utterance and the restriction of those cognitive effects to that sentence's possible speaker meaning.

Another benefit, and probably the greatest appeal to Searle's theory of metaphor, is that it follows an established theory of language; namely, the Gricean, pragmatic framework. It is simple enough to take what we know about implicatures and meanings beyond Grice's "what is said" and apply them to metaphor because both are "extralinguistic" concepts in the eyes of pragmatics. As a result, much of what we have to say about conversational implicatures, both general and particularized, applies to metaphor. Take the feature of cancelability; it seems as consistent with metaphor as it is with conversational implicatures. For example, if I said

(25) "Trevor is a fortress."

One could assume I mean to say that he is strong, or solid; however, I could cancel that meaning by saying "I didn't mean to imply that he was strong; rather, I meant to imply that he was solitary." However, there seems to be some difficulty in porting over Grice's theory of implicatures. One problem that arises is "what type of implicatures are metaphors?" That is, are they exclusively analogous to conversational implicatures or are

different types of implicatures analogous to different types of metaphors? Dead metaphors seem to fit the structure of conventional metaphors in that their extralinguistic meaning is fixed by the particles of the utterance, even though these particles may not be as fixed as the “but” and “therefore” examples outlined in our discussion of Grice. For example, when one person refers to the leg of a chair or the tongue of a shoe, those meanings seem to be more fixed than less established metaphors like (25).

There is another example that has fascinated me, which takes the question of “what types of implicatures are metaphors?” from a point of being a fun and interesting philosophical question about the categorization of metaphors to a genuine, concrete, question. In 2016, Pamela Ramsey Taylor, a politician in the United States, referred to Michelle Obama as an “ape in heels.” When this statement reached the American public, this politician was charged with making a racist statement. The politician insisted that the statement was not racially loaded. Despite their denial, the incident resulted in Mrs. Taylor being fired.<sup>9</sup> Keeping this in mind, it appears to be the case that even if cancelability is a defining feature of conversational implicatures, and even if metaphors inherit this feature, in the case where this person referred to Obama as “an ape in heels,” in the eyes of the American public, the implicature is not cancelable. In the realm of metaphor, how can we make sense of this? What is going on here and how can it help us understand metaphor? There are a number of possible answers; however, none of them are clearly correct to me. To begin, and, moreover, to simplify, the utterance contains the metaphor “Michelle Obama is an ape.” If the speaker attempted to cancel the racially-loaded extralinguistic meaning by claiming “I didn't mean to implicate [these racially-loaded meanings],” the speaker may assert that perhaps Michelle Obama is aggressive or

---

<sup>9</sup> As it turns out, Mrs. Taylor was allowed to keep her job, although she received a six week suspension.

ungraceful (for whatever reason they may have). Since this utterance undoubtedly takes the form of a simple metaphor and we accept that simple metaphors take on the same features of conversational implicatures, this reconstruction of how the speaker could cancel the implicated extralinguistic meaning would be consistent with the features of conversational implicatures that Grice has established and that have generally been accepted. The first answer to the question of “how can we make sense of [this case]” would be: perhaps this is not how conversational implicatures work. However, although it is somewhat dismissive to outright claim that this is not the case, it just does not seem to be. It appears that giving up one of the defining features of conversational implicatures is just too hard a bullet to bite for the sake of understanding a metaphor that may not necessarily even apply to conversational implicatures.

The second answer would be: perhaps this particular metaphor is not a conversational implicature; perhaps it is a conventional implicature. This answer seems plausible and is the answer that I tend towards. However, this position requires some explaining. Since conventional implicatures are identified by the meaning of certain particles of the utterance—like “but” and “therefore”—and no such particles, as clearly defined, are present in the metaphorical utterance “Michelle Obama is an ape,” then perhaps claiming that this utterance is a conventional implicature is misguided and it would be more along the lines of a generalized conversational implicature, which is cancelable like particularized conversational implicatures, but more difficult to cancel. I would be willing to accept this claim if it were not for the fact that the American public refused to allow this politician to cancel the racially-loaded meaning of their utterance. I want to hold that this metaphor is like a conventional implicature. It simply seems that

there is something about the utterance that is accepted as a conventional meaning and, therefore, cannot be cancelled the same way that particularized conversational implicatures can be, even though there are no “particles.” My only answer for this would be the history surrounding the metaphor “[X non-white person] is an ape” and similar references to non-whites in historical American culture. Since such a history exists, this particular metaphor contains within it a racially-loaded meaning that cannot be cancelled. As such, I would posit that this particular metaphor is not actually a metaphor, but at bottom a slur. However, it still takes the shape “P is R,” which is the form of a simple metaphor. I am willing to accept that it is a slur contained within, or at least takes the shape of, a metaphor. In other words, it is the act of slurring, but with a metaphor rather than an outright slur. Since it is an act of slurring, it changes the nature of the metaphor in such a way as to negate the cancelability feature, making it more like a conventional implicature. This *seems* correct to me, but it is not obvious to me that it is.

There is a final answer, which is: we<sup>10</sup> have grown socially to hold certain metaphors to a different standard. This means that since this metaphor takes on a racially-loaded, or bigoted, meaning, we are less accepting of the feature of cancelability. This could be the case for any racially-loaded metaphor (or similarly, sexist, homophobic, and other metaphors that lean on bigoted ideas) and, as such, they ought to be treated differently from simple, novel, or even ironic metaphors. Perhaps racially-loaded (or bigoted) metaphors are in a category of their own, causing a different reaction in the hearer when the speaker is suspected of having an underlying or concealed intent. This

---

<sup>10</sup> By “we” here I mean something probably too general like “we as a culture,” “we as a society,” “we in history,” or even “we as speakers [or at least hearers] of metaphor.”

answer is possible, and it is not even clear that it is incompatible with other answers given, but, even though it is possible, I am not really sure how I could defend it.

### **Conclusion:**

With the exception of this corner case, Searle dramatically refines our understanding of metaphor. Specifically, by adopting the pragmatic framework of Grice and applying it to metaphor, we develop our understanding of metaphor as containing many, if not all, the same features of conversational implicatures. This seems to be the greatest strength, or benefit, to Searle's account of metaphor; namely, that it follows a strong, intuitive, and established framework of language and, as a result, by adopting this theory of metaphor, we do not have to sacrifice anything from our theory of language.

The most important feature we gain by applying Grice's theory of communication to metaphor is that metaphors are, by definition, cancelable, just like conversational implicatures. We see this in probably any example of a simple metaphor. Take the simple metaphor

(26) "Trevor is a bull."

If I utter this metaphor to someone, s/he might assume that what I am trying to communicate is something like "Trevor is strong, tough, etc."; however, this interpretation of the metaphor can be cancelled by saying something like: "no, you misunderstand me, I mean Trevor is a Taurus." Therefore, by adopting the pragmatic framework of Grice, Searle has shown how metaphors act like conversational implicatures, one of the most defining features, it seems, is cancellability.

Although there is an abundance of benefits to Searle's theory of metaphor, it is not without its faults. As we have seen, the pragmatic view has difficulty accounting for novel, or poetic, metaphors. The second objection comes in the form of twice-true and twice-apt metaphors. Finally, and what seems to be the most significant fault of Searle's theory, is that there is no account of how one comes to know these extended meanings of metaphors. This last objection could be accounted for by something like Black's system of associated commonplaces, or maybe he could cash this out with an appeal to some type of cognitive phenomenon, or even principle; however, Searle does not give any such account. It is possible that Searle simply took it for granted that we know these extended meanings, or possibly even that such explanatory work had been done by thinkers before him, so he did not give an account. Nonetheless, it is a significant gap in his theory.

Overall, Searle, *qua* Grice, presents a strong, intuitive account of metaphor. This account makes it clear that metaphor is undeniably a pragmatic phenomenon. However, since Searle's theory has such significant objections posed against it, perhaps metaphor is not *exclusively* a pragmatic phenomenon. Nonetheless, with Seale's account, we see what metaphor looks like when we locate its power in pragmatics.

## Chapter 4: Donald Davidson

### A Working Theory of Perlocutionary Effects: An In-Depth Analysis of Donald

#### Davidson's *What Metaphors Mean*

#### Overview:

In his critique, *What Metaphors Mean*, Donald Davidson puts forward a radical alternative, departing significantly with all previous theories up to this point. Davidson's claim is that metaphors "in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (Davidson, 1978; 32). By "nothing more" Davidson is rejecting the concept of metaphorical meaning.

Curiously, Davidson agrees with Black and Searle as to what metaphor can do. The dispute, he argues, is over *how* metaphor accomplishes it. In short, he believes those accounts that attempt to analyze metaphor from some special secondary meaning or speaker's meaning are mistaken. He goes on to claim that "there are no instructions for devising metaphors; there is no manual for determining what a metaphor 'means' or 'says;' there is no test for metaphor that does not call for taste" (Davidson, 1978; 31). In other words, Davidson opposes the theses of Max Black, Paul Henle, Nelson Goodman, Monroe Beardsley, and the rest in their accounts of metaphor (Davidson, 1978; 33).

Specifically, the theory that determining a metaphor's meaning through some set of rules like, for example, Black's system of associated commonplaces is a mistake because of Davidson's claim that "there is no test for metaphor that does not call for taste." Davidson makes it clear that he sees his theory in opposition to the works of Black when he says in a footnote: "I think Max Black is wrong when he says, 'The rules of our

language determine that some expressions must count as metaphors” (Davidson, 1978; 31). Here, Davidson develops his view in opposition to Black’s theory of metaphor; specifically, Black’s view that metaphor is a semantic phenomenon defined by the “rules of our language.” Rather, Davidson holds that metaphors can only “mean” what the words mean in a literal sense; namely, sentence meaning. Although he does not deny that metaphors can be used to produce certain effects in an addressee, the effects are different in kind from cognitive content. Davidson makes the bold, and intriguing claim that the interpretation of metaphor is akin to dream analysis. He calls the power of metaphor the “dreamwork” of language. In essence, he claims that like dream analysis (which he considers to be pseudoscience) the interpretation of metaphor reflects the interpreter just as much as the originator, opposed to reflecting the meaning of the metaphor (Davidson, 1978; 31). Therefore, the concept of “metaphorical meaning” as some type of “extended” or “additional” meaning, or meaning beyond the literal meaning(s) of an utterance is, for Davidson, the “central mistake” in theories of metaphor (Davidson, 1978; 32).

Davidson’s dismissal of “metaphorical meaning” as such leans on his understanding of “meaning;” namely, his philosophy of language in general. Specifically, Davidson holds a “verificationist” account of meaning. The verificationist account of language would hold, or typically does hold, that metaphors such as (3) are not verifiable in the ordinary, empirical way, they cannot be judged as cognitively meaningful.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the term “meaning,” illustrated as linguistic meaning, does not, and cannot, apply to metaphor; rather, there is only emotive or affective significance.<sup>12</sup> However, the meaning that (3) has is its literal meaning (however strange that literal meaning is); for

---

<sup>11</sup> William G. Lycan, 2000; 177.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

example, that the object, Juliet, is a star at the center of the solar system. Overall, Davidson takes his stance against traditional theories of metaphor by claiming that metaphor is not a linguistic phenomenon.

One of the most obvious questions is, how can we account for the effects produced by metaphor? Davidson proposes that metaphor is *causal* efficacy. To say metaphor is causal is to say that a metaphorical utterance evokes some type of emotive, psychological content. For example, Davidson asserts: “a metaphor makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things” and later goes on to say that “a simile tells us, in part, what a metaphor merely nudges us into noting” (Davidson, 1978; 33-38). Although metaphor nudges the hearer to attend some likeness, there is no linguistic mechanism or logical way to indicate what it is to be noted; it is merely cognitive or psychological and, therefore, not in the linguistic domain.<sup>13</sup>

For Davidson, since metaphor is causal—that is, merely causes psychological effects in the hearer—rather than cognitively meaningful, metaphors are, therefore, a matter of use. For example, Davidson says:

I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of sentences they compromise. (Davidson, 1978; 33)

In other words, Davidson “[depends] on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do” (Davidson, 1978; 33). He goes on to argue that “there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention [...] there is no end to what we want to mention” (Davidson, 1978; 46). Thus, the effects of metaphor are non-propositional or, in

---

<sup>13</sup> William G. Lycan, 2000; 178.

other words, it belongs to the perlocutionary effects of language; that is, the effects caused by the utterance.

Davidson's account finds the most credibility, perhaps, when discussing highly novel and poetic metaphors. Often times, when confronted with a metaphor such as (10), I think such cases highlight the difficulty we often face in metaphor interpretation. Two points of observation: first, in order to make sense of the intended effects, we must grapple with the literal meaning of the terms in the comparison. That is to say, during the interpretation process, we must keep the encoded meanings activated. Secondly, the amount of effects that are produced are numerous, and indefinite. This would typically pose a problem to theories of metaphor because they typically need to provide some account of how one ought to interpret and derive meaning from the metaphor, as seen in the chapters on Black and Searle; however, with Davidson's position, we can simply account for this metaphor by way of perlocutionary effect.

In her work, *Metaphorically Speaking*, Patti D. Nogales shows that, in treating metaphor as a matter of use, Davidson employs two fundamental distinctions. Specifically, Nogales articulates:

The first is between meaning (a semantic notion) and use (a pragmatic notion, involving language as a tool used to carry out certain actions). The second distinction, which is based upon the first, is between phenomena determined by semantic factors such as meaning, that is, at the level of semantics, and phenomena determined by pragmatic factors, that is, at the level of the user. The latter distinction is critical to determining whether metaphor can be studied within the realm of semantics or whether, because it only appears at the level of the user, that is, at the level of the speech act, it can only be studied at the level of pragmatics. (Nogales, 1999; 62-63)

This is, once again, to assert that metaphor is, primarily, *not* a semantic phenomenon. Here, Nogales claims that, for Davidson, metaphors "can only be studied at the level of pragmatics;" however, studying metaphor at the pragmatic level is different from the

pragmatic view of metaphor that someone like Searle would hold. Recall, for Searle studying metaphor at the pragmatic level is to analyze metaphor in terms of speaker *meaning* and Gricean implicatures, or the *meanings* implicated in a speaker's utterance. Conversely, again, for Davidson, rather than analyzing the pragmatic features of meaning as Searle would, Davidson analyzes the pragmatic features of causation; namely, which features of metaphor, at the pragmatic level, nudge the hearer to note. Finally, Nogales lays out Davidson's dismissal of semantic theories (as laid out by, for example, Max Black) in three steps:

(1) by showing that the literal meaning of a metaphor needs to be active in order for it to be metaphorical (defeating, in the process, the view of metaphor as an extension of literal meaning); (2) by criticizing existing semantic theories of metaphor (specifically, those that explain metaphor in terms of metaphorical meaning); and (3) by arguing directly against the notion of metaphorical meaning. (Nogales, 1999; 62-63)

Overall, in his critique of semantic theories of metaphor, and distinguishing himself from the other pragmatists, Davidson treats metaphors on par with jokes, similes, and lies where we are not prompted to calculate a secondary meaning.

Since Davidson approaches metaphor with a rigid account of "meaning," and, his stance against linguistic accounts of how one can understand metaphor, "much of what [he has] to say [in his paper] is critical"; that is, critical analysis of the generally accepted views of metaphor for his time (Davidson, 1978; 32).

Although Davidson states that he disagrees with Black and states that his paper "flies in the face" of the views of his time, making his view seem directly opposed to the works of Max Black, Paul Henle, and others, he claims that for the most part he does not disagree with their accounts of what metaphor accomplishes; instead, Davidson claims that metaphor "accomplishes more, and that what is additional is a different *kind*" (my

italics, Davidson, 1978; 33). This is to say that Davidson's disagreement with other theories is with how metaphor "works its wonders" (Davidson, 1978; 33).

Davidson begins his critical analysis of the dominant theories of his time by calling into question whether metaphors can be paraphrased or not.<sup>14</sup> Davidson calls into question the paraphrasability of metaphor by saying: "I agree with the view that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, but I think this is not because metaphors say something too novel for literal expression but because there is nothing there to paraphrase" (Davidson, 1978; 32). Davidson goes on to say:

Paraphrase, whether it is possible or not, is appropriate to what is said: we try, in paraphrase, to say it another way. But if I am right, a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal). (Davidson, 1978; 32)

Here, when Davidson says "paraphrase [...] is appropriate to what is said," he refers to an implied meaning, opposed to literal, or semantic meaning. In other words, paraphrase is a pragmatic phenomenon; namely, there is an "extended," or implied, meaning that one can arrive at through paraphrase. This is not the case for metaphor. In the example (3) to claim that there is an "extended meaning" that one can arrive at through paraphrase, such as "Juliet is beautiful" or "Juliet makes me feel warm," would be a mistake because the words in (3) do not hold any "extended" meaning, or anything beyond the literal meaning: "Juliet is a star at the centre of the solar system." Therefore, metaphor is not a pragmatic phenomenon, in terms of implicatures, or implied *meaning*. But, as Davidson says, he does not deny that a metaphor has a point, not that that point can be brought out by using further words; that is, metaphors cannot be paraphrased (Davidson, 1978; 32).

Nogales summarizes Davidson's position on paraphrasability clearly as:

---

<sup>14</sup> I will refer to this as the "paraphrasability" of metaphor.

- 1) Metaphorical utterances typically do not admit paraphrasing.
- 2) Any given cognitive content can be expressed in at least two different ways (i.e., it can be paraphrased).
- 3) Being (easily) paraphrasable is a test of whether cognitive content of a sentence captures its cognitive content.
- 4) Therefore, the cognitive effect of a metaphorical utterance does not lie in the cognitive content of its terms.
- 5) Metaphorical meaning is defined so as to capture the cognitive effect of the utterance through cognitive content.
- 6) Therefore, there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning as defined.<sup>15</sup>

To understand this argument, it is important to make a distinction between cognitive content and psychological effects. To put it in simple terms, one can think of cognitive content as propositional content; or, to cut out the fluff, a proposition. In other words, when Romeo utters “Juliet is the sun,” he asserts that Juliet is a star at the centre of the solar system; for Davidson, this is the cognitive content of the metaphor. Conversely, the psychological effects are the, typically emotive, effects caused when one hears or reads a metaphor (thoughts, visions, feelings, etc.). So, when Romeo utters “Juliet is the sun,” and the listener concludes that he means something like Juliet is the light of Romeo’s life, then those are extralinguistic,<sup>16</sup> which Davidson deems mistaken and, rather, refers to this “meaning” as a psychological effect that we misinterpret as extralinguistic. Nogales also notes this distinction as Davidson’s

underlying [...] conception of what it means to be paraphrasable, which seems to involve not only the cognitive content of an utterance, as evidenced by its truth

---

<sup>15</sup> Patti D. Nogales, 1999; 75.

<sup>16</sup> That is, beyond linguistic. But, keep in mind, Davidson resists this concept of extralinguistic meaning.

conditions, but also its effect, which seems to include the feelings as well as thoughts we are led to contemplate. (Nogales, 1999; 32)

With this distinction in mind, one can see that the psychological effects have no relationship to the linguistic meaning, or cognitive content. Since the cognitive content does not relate to the psychological effects, there is no method for restricting the possible meanings of a metaphor. That is, in a null context, or to read a metaphor from a strictly semantic perspective, the possible readings are (seemingly) infinite. Therefore, since there is no “metaphorical meaning” and the potential readings of a metaphor are so vast, then this eliminates the possibility of misreading, or misinterpreting, a metaphor. This opens a question of whether one can get a reading of a metaphor “right.”

Davidson directly opposes this approach to defining metaphorical meaning by saying that through this approach hearers rarely get a reading of a metaphor correct; moreover, if they do, it is only occasionally or accidentally correct, or “true.”<sup>17</sup> Beyond simple metaphors, it is unclear how an argument for paraphrasability can accommodate for novel and poetic metaphors. Specifically, how can one accurately paraphrase:

(27) “When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/Lends the tongue vows.”<sup>18</sup>

Or, alternatively:

(28) “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers -/That perches in the soul -/And sings the tune without the words -/And never stops - at all -”<sup>19</sup>

It is unclear how these sentences can possibly be paraphrased. For Davidson, the fact that it is unclear how one would paraphrase these sentences is no coincidence. The fact that these cannot be paraphrased is his point. There is nothing unique about poetic or novel metaphors compared to simple metaphors. Poetic metaphors are simply a good example

---

<sup>17</sup> William G. Lycan, 2000; 178.

<sup>18</sup> Hamlet, I. iii.

<sup>19</sup> “Hope is the thing with feathers – (314), Emily Dickinson.

of Davidson's point. According to Davidson, these expressions are not too novel to be paraphrased; rather, "there is nothing there to paraphrase" (Davidson, 1978; 32).

After reconstructing the argument for the traditional theory for paraphrasability, Davidson moves on to what he calls "the more sophisticated variant of elliptical theory of metaphor." This is not to be confused, Davidson says, with the view that metaphors *are* elliptical similes. Simply put, the elliptical theory of metaphor holds that the "meaning of a metaphor is identical with the literal meaning of a corresponding simile" (Davidson, 1978; 38). In other words, beneath each metaphor is a simile to be unpacked. For example, if one were to utter the metaphor:

(29) "Frank is a machine."

Then what lies beneath that utterance is a simile; namely, Frank is like a machine, which would typically imply things such as: "Frank is always working hard," "Frank never gets tired," and so on. According to Davidson, "we can learn much about what metaphors mean by comparing them with similes, for a simile tells us, in part, what a metaphor merely nudges us into noting" (Davidson, 1978; 38). In other words, simile can be used as a tool in grasping a metaphor; however, this does not mean that they are one and the same.

Davidson has three main criticisms of the elliptical view of metaphor and "its more sophisticated variant." The first critique against this view is simple: it is often difficult to identify the simile that corresponds to a particular metaphor. This objection comes by way of example. Davidson presents a quote from Virginia Woolf that states: a highbrow is "a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a

gallop across country in pursuit of an idea” (Davidson; 1978; 38). Davidson continues by attempting to identify the corresponding simile:

A highbrow man or woman whose intelligence is like a thoroughbred horse and who persists in thinking about an idea like a rider galloping across country in pursuit of...well, something. (Davidson, 1978; 38)

Overall, Davidson deems this attempt unsuccessful. It is important to note that this issue is not unique to Virginia Woolf. One can take the complex metaphor (28). Now to find the corresponding simile: “Hope” is like a bird in the soul and sings a tune and never stops—at all. It is incredibly unclear whether this is the corresponding simile, and even if it is the appropriate corresponding simile, it seems that there is nothing gained from reconstructing it as such, just like in the case of the quote Davidson provided by Virginia Woolf. Therefore, it is unclear how to find a corresponding simile to a given metaphor, or if it is even possible sometimes. Moreover, these are not rare cases that can be dismissed as anomalies. It seems rather simple to find poetic metaphors that seemingly have no corresponding simile.

Davidson begins his next critique by articulating that this theory as making “no distinction in meaning between a metaphor and some related simile and does not provide any ground for speaking of figurative, metaphorical, or special meanings” (Davidson, 1978: 38-39). Moreover, the benefit of this theory is its simplicity; however, he also claims that its downfall is that it is too simple to work, which is illuminated when Davidson states:

If we make the literal meaning of the metaphor to be the literal meaning of a matching simile, we deny access to what we originally took to be the literal meaning of the metaphor, and we agreed almost from the start that *this* meaning was essential to the working of the metaphor, whatever else might have to be brought in the way of a nonliteral meaning (38-39).

In other words, if there is a “one-to-one” mapping of metaphorical meaning to its corresponding simile, then there is no “access” to the literal meaning of that metaphor, which is “essential” to the working of the metaphor. So, without access to the literal meaning of a metaphor, there is something essential lost to that metaphor. Moreover, Davidson insists that “we agreed almost from the start that [literal] meaning is essential.” For example, to claim that what (3) *means* is its corresponding simile—“Juliet is like the sun”—means we lose the literal meaning of the metaphor, “Juliet is a star at the center of the solar system,” which Davidson holds is what is “essential to the working of the metaphor.” Therefore, if there can be a “one-to-one” mapping of a metaphor to a corresponding simile, there needs to be a distinction made between that metaphor and its corresponding simile because without that step we lose something that, as Davidson claims, we already agreed was essential to the working of metaphor.

Davidson continues to criticize the elliptical theory of metaphor and its more sophisticated variant by claiming that they share a “fatal defect”:

They make the hidden meaning of the metaphor all too obvious and accessible. In each case the hidden meaning is to be found simply by looking to the literal meaning of what is usually a painfully trivial simile [...] It is trivial because everything is like everything, and in endless ways. Metaphors are often very difficult to interpret and, so it is said, impossible to paraphrase. But with this theory, interpretation and paraphrase typically are ready to the hand of the most callow. (Davidson, 1978; 39).

Here Davidson charges the elliptical theory of metaphor (and its more sophisticated variant) with trivializing the meanings of different metaphors by making them all too obvious and accessible. For example, if one claims that the meaning of the metaphor

(30) “Frank is a workhorse.”

Is the corresponding simile, “Frank is like a workhorse,” one should feel dissatisfied with such an interpretation because it seems all too obvious that, rather than claiming that

Frank is literally a workhorse, the speaker means that Frank is *like* a workhorse insofar as he incessantly pushes himself to get a job done. However, Davidson takes this criticism further by claiming that the thesis of the elliptical theory is trivially true “because everything is like everything.” This is to say that any time someone reveals the simile that corresponds to a given metaphor, the meaning is obvious because there is *always* some way in which one thing relates to another: Brenda is like a Saint because she can do no wrong; Frank is like a workhorse because he works so hard; Nic is like a tank because he is strong; and so on. And these ways that  $x$  relates to  $y$  are not necessarily the only ways that  $x$  can relate to  $y$  because  $x$  can relate to  $y$  in infinite ways, or “in endless ways” as Davidson says, and, as a result, one can pick out any way in which  $x$  relates to  $y$  and claim it to be the meaning of the given metaphor, which trivializes it, and seems to be wrong to Davidson.<sup>20</sup>

Davidson claims that the elliptical theory of simile gained traction because of two “confusions”: the first has been alluded to, but Davidson specifies, “if metaphors are elliptical similes, they say explicitly what similes say, for ellipsis is a form of abbreviation, not paraphrase or indirection” (Davidson, 1978; 39). The second, similar but more important issue for Davidson is that metaphors often go beyond, or say more than, what a corresponding simile can offer. Davidson qualifies this by saying that a corresponding simile “no more tells us what similarities we are to notice than the metaphor does” (Davidson, 1978; 39). For instance, does saying (9) means “Nic is like a tank” develop one’s understanding, or the meaning, of the metaphor any more than the metaphor does itself? In other words, the metaphor and its corresponding simile say the

---

<sup>20</sup> This objection to the elliptical theory of metaphor seems to be Davidson’s weakest. There are plenty of other difficulties with the elliptical theory of metaphor. This reason seems to be one that Davidson does not like, rather than one that says the theory is “wrong,” or untenable.

same thing and, as a result, uncovering the hidden simile tells the hearer nothing more about the metaphor. To emphasize Davidson's second point, take, for example:

(31) "He is a hummingbird."

One may translate (31) to "he is like a hummingbird" and deduce meanings like: he is active, hardworking, nice to look at, or even gentle. However, the metaphor may mean something more like: he cannot focus on one thing, or is possibly manic. The corresponding simile seems to miss the intended meaning of the metaphor because being manic is not really captured by our typical ideas of a hummingbird; it is a quality that we can project upon hummingbirds and perhaps we can make sense of that by drawing some type of parallel between the quick, sporadic movements of a hummingbird and one's experience of racing, maybe even what one could call sporadic, thoughts, even though we typically don't attribute mania to hummingbirds. Therefore, beyond saying that not all metaphors have a corresponding simile, Davidson illustrates that even when there are corresponding similes, they seem to miss something, whether it be the ability to develop our understanding of a metaphor or to capture a significant meaning of a metaphor altogether.

Davidson concludes his critique of the elliptical theory and its more sophisticated variant by asserting that just because a simile "wears a declaration of similitude on its sleeve, [...] it is [...] far less plausible than in the case of metaphor to maintain that there is a hidden second meaning" (Davidson; 1978; 40). By noting what a simile literally says, we see that two things resemble one another—"this traffic is like molasses in January"—and we take the two objects—"traffic" and "molasses in January"—consider their similarity—they are both slow moving—and take that to be the point. After going

through this process of uncovering the similitude, or similarity, of the simile, we might assert that this is the similarity that the author, or speaker, intended, or meant, us to notice. But, according to Davidson:

the supposed figurative meaning of a simile explains nothing; it is not a feature of the word that the word has prior to independent of the context of use, and it rests upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning (Davidson, 1978; 40).

It is important to emphasize Davidson's view that the figurative meaning "is not a feature of the word"; since the point of the concept of linguistic meaning is to explain what can be done with words, we should "feel little temptation to explain what has happened by endowing the words themselves with a second, or figurative, meaning" (Davidson, 1978; 40).

In other words, what Davidson says here is that this uncovered similarity, or "meaning," between traffic and molasses in January is not something that is embedded in the words and is somehow drawn out in the comparison. Rather, like a bump on the head, we are nudged into entertaining images. To highlight what he means, Davidson turns to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. Briefly, when one sees Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, one may be prompted to notice that it can be seen as a duck. If I say to you: "it's a duck" with a bit of luck, you may see it *as* a duck. If I say to you "it's a rabbit," you may see it *as* a rabbit. However, seeing it *as* a duck or rabbit does not require that one see *that* it is a duck or rabbit. As Davidson says:

Perhaps you have come to realize the drawing can be seen as a duck or as a rabbit. But one could come to know this without ever seeing the drawing as a duck or as a rabbit. *Seeing as is not seeing that.* (my italics, Davidson, 1978; 47).

Similarly, in metaphor, the information that the audience retrieves is not some extra, or secondary, sort of meaning whereby the words suddenly undergo a change of meaning

due to this specific “context of use”; rather, what is produced is simply an effect of putting these words together in that way. Davidson makes this explicit when he says:

Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts an insight. Since in most cases of what the metaphor prompts or inspires is not entirely, or even at all, a recognition of some truth or fact, the attempt to give literal expression to the content of the metaphor is simply misguided. (Davidson, 1978, 47).

Similarly, to the duck-rabbit where I can tell you that the drawing is a duck or a rabbit and there is no proposition that expresses what I have led you to see, so too it is with metaphor where I can tell you that the meaning of (2) is that Sam is sneaky or Sam sheds his skin, but there is no propositional content that can express that psychological effect because that psychological effect is not contained within the meanings of the words themselves. Therefore, as seeing that is not seeing as in the case of Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, so too it is with metaphor that one cannot conflate the linguistic meanings of a metaphor with its psychological effects.

Davidson goes on to explain how metaphor differs from simile. He begins by saying that in the context of metaphor, “what words do with their literal meaning in simile must be possible for them to do with metaphor” because metaphor directs attention to the same sorts of similarities as the corresponding similes (Davidson, 1978; 40). However, the major difference between metaphor and simile is that “the unexpected or subtle parallels and analogies it is the business of metaphor to promote need not depend, for their promotion, on more than the literal meanings of words” (Davidson, 40; 1978). This is to say that where simile relies on the customs that govern ordinary meaning, metaphor does not. In other words, as we have seen, since similes are always true in their propositional content, because everything is like everything in some way, they do not require anything beyond what the words mean to be meaningful. Conversely, since

metaphors are usually false, for metaphor to be meaningful, they require something beyond linguistic meaning; namely, their psychological effects. Therefore, metaphors are unlike similes in that they require meaning beyond their cognitive content to be meaningful, where similes do not.

It is at this point in the paper that Davidson presents his own theory. He argues that based on the theories that he has reconstructed and presented arguments against has led to the conclusion that “as much of metaphor as can be explained in terms of meaning may, and indeed must, be explained by appeal to the literal meanings of words” (Donald Davidson, 1978; 41). This is to reassert Davidson’s verificationist position on language and metaphor: when one talks about the meaning of a given metaphor s/he can only talk about the literal meaning of the words used. Davidson goes on to say that “a consequence is that the sentences in which metaphors occur are true or false in a normal, literal way, for if the words in them don’t have special meanings, sentences don’t have special truth” (Davidson, 1978; 41). In other words, if we are to cash out the meaning of metaphor by appealing to the literal meaning of the words used, as Davidson claims we must, then the sentences in which metaphors occur have to be cashed out in the same vein; namely, true or false in a “normal, literal way.” Clearly stated, Davidson’s thesis is as follows:

P1: If a sentence in which metaphors occur are true or false in a special way, then the words of sentences where metaphors occur have special meanings.

P2: It is not the case that the words of a sentence where metaphors occur have special meanings.

C: Therefore, it is not the case that a sentence in which metaphors occur are true or false in a special way.

As Davidson claims, this *modus tollens* argument simply follows from the critical analysis that he has conducted up to this point. That is, each theory that Davidson has looked at has led him to assert that metaphors require normal, literal meanings of the words and, as a result, there is no reason to assert that metaphorical sentences require a special meaning if the words themselves do not require a special meaning. However, this is not to say that there is no such thing as “metaphorical truth,” but, if there is such a thing as metaphorical truth, it has to be explained in a way other than “sentence truth” or “meaning.” Davidson explains that metaphor “does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed, and there is no reason, [...] not to say these visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by the metaphor, are true or false” (Davidson, 1978; 41). Overall, these “visions, thoughts, and feelings” inspired by the metaphor can be cashed out as the psychological effects of the utterance.

It is important to note that emphasizing truth and falsity in this way enables Davidson to distinguish simile from metaphor; this is a big move. By restricting truth and falsity to its “ordinary sense,” it is clear that metaphorical utterances are usually false and all similes are true. When one utters “this traffic is molasses,” it is apparent that the utterance is false. Conversely, when one utters “this traffic is like molasses,” it is apparent that the utterance is true because, as Davidson claims, “everything is like everything” (Davidson, 1978; 41).

According to Davidson, the best way to accommodate for the objections that he has posed against the theories he has taken to task throughout his work is to give up the idea of meaning carrying any concept of extralinguistic meaning. Instead of searching for some type of “encoded content,” these traditional views have simply told us about the

effects of metaphor. That is, the things that metaphor evoke, or inspire, in us should simply be treated as the psychological effects of metaphor, whether they be visions, thoughts, and feelings, and not metaphorical “meaning.” (Davidson, 1978; 45). By making this claim, Davidson gets to maintain his verificationist theory of language in general without sacrificing anything to account for metaphor.

### **Objections:**

If one accepts Davidson’s framework, poetic metaphors can be accounted for in a way that things like Black’s system of associated commonplaces cannot. However, a major flaw of Davidson’s position of paraphrasability is that this problem is not unique to metaphorical utterances; that is, even literal utterances can be difficult, or even impossible, to paraphrase. This is a somewhat substantial objection to Davidson because 1) it jeopardizes his conception of “meaning,” and 2) it blurs the distinction between literal and metaphorical utterances. In other words, to account for this objection, Davidson may need to hold a position on language like his position on metaphor. So, rather than asserting that “metaphor is a dreamwork,” he would have to assert something like “language, in general, is a dreamwork,” and although this position would be interesting, it seems to cost Davidson too much. An alternative to this extreme solution, as Nogales articulates, would be to show that paraphrasability is essential to cognitive content.<sup>21</sup>

Another problem with Davidson’s account of metaphor is the concept of “dead metaphors.” Specifically, when a metaphor “dies,” the “metaphorical meaning” becomes the word’s, or phrase’s, literal meaning. For example, when one speaks of a “current of

---

<sup>21</sup> Patti D. Nogales, 1999; 75-76.

electricity,” one speaks metaphorically by comparing the “flow” of electricity to a river’s flow. Another example, the “leg” of a table compares what tables “stand” on and what humans and animals stand on. In both cases the metaphorical meaning has replaced the literal meaning of the utterance. The problem that arises here is that these utterances are clearly metaphorical; however, the probability of a competent speaker misreading the utterance seems almost impossible; there does not seem to be a disconnect with the cognitive content and its psychological effects, even though the utterance is metaphorical. Moreover, Davidson’s understanding of meaningful, literal language seems to be mistaken if by literal he means without metaphor because metaphors like the ones shown enrich literal language constantly.

Davidson anticipates this concept of dead metaphors being an objection in some of his closing remarks when he says:

if words in metaphor bear a coded meaning, how can this meaning differ from the meaning those same words bear in the case where the metaphor *dies*—that is, when it comes to be a part of the language? Why doesn’t “He was burned up” as now used and meant mean *exactly* what the fresh metaphor once meant? Yet all that the dead metaphor means is that he was very angry—a notion not very difficult to make explicit (Davidson, 1978; 45).

However, this seems to be all he says on the issue. With this in mind, the issue of metaphor seems to be the most significant objection that one could pose against Davidson because he articulated the issue and opted to not speak on it.

The final objection that can be posed against Davidson is that his theory does not seem to adhere to how metaphors *seem* to work; that is, metaphors *seem* to have extended meaning. When one hears a metaphor (even a new, or unfamiliar metaphor), it seems like he or she immediately grasps some concept of metaphorical meaning. For example, if I

get a call from a friend who recently moved to New York City, I ask them how they are enjoying the new city, and they reply:

(32) “New York City is a pressure cooker.”

Immediately, it seems like I can pick up some type of extended, or metaphorical, meaning from this utterance: New York City is stressful. This is not a unique example because we appear to go through this process whenever we hear metaphors and they seem meaningful to us. It is possible that Davidson may simply dismiss this point as psychological effects, claiming that the utterances are “meaningful” in that they evoke these effects, but they do not have “meaning” in the strict sense that he is using. However, we seem to communicate meaningfully in this instance because I understand the intended meaning of my friend’s utterance; namely, that New York City is stressful. Therefore, Davidson’s theory of metaphor does not seem to capture our experiences with metaphor.

### **Virtues:**

Even with these objections in mind, there are clear virtues to Davidson’s non-cognitivist approach. First, since Davidson’s theory of metaphor can account for novel and poetic metaphors, it seems that theories of metaphorical meaning need to adapt to accommodate for Davidson’s account. Second, beyond indexicals, Davidson’s claim that a strictly semantic use of metaphor—i.e., a metaphor in a null context—appears to have an infinite amount of possible interpretations, especially considering the cancellability of metaphor; so, Davidson proves that, to have the possibility of reliable interpretations of metaphors, we need to theorize beyond the semantics. Whether we deal with this extralinguistic, or extra-semantic, content cognitively as Davidson does, or pragmatically

as Searle does, is up to the theorist; however, it seems to me that we need all three approaches if we hope to capture any conception of “metaphorhood,” or at least to account for the various types of metaphor.

### **Conclusion:**

Davidson has provided us with an interesting alternative to the traditional semantic and pragmatic theories of metaphor by introducing psychological effects into the discussion. Generally speaking, his thesis is easy enough: what we have taken to be the extended, or even encoded, meanings of metaphors are simply the psychological effects of the words; the words themselves do not take on any different meanings just because they are in the context of a metaphor. By making this assertion, Davidson does not have to sacrifice verificationism or truth-conditions to account for metaphor. In any figurative context, words (and sentences) simply mean what they literally, or linguistically, mean and, as a result, similes are always true because, as Davidson asserts, everything is like everything and metaphors are usually false.

Beyond giving us a new axis to tackle metaphor on, Davidson has not only provided a critique of many of the established theories of his time, but also a method of resolving many of the issues that he uncovers throughout his work. First, he explains why it is wrong to think that metaphor produces its result by having a meaning which results from the interaction of two ideas. Second, Davidson explains why it is wrong to claim that “a metaphor ‘says one thing and means another’” or that “a metaphor asserts or implies certain complex things by dint of a special meaning and *thus* accomplishes its job of yielding an ‘insight’” (Davidson, 1978; 46). Davidson’s response to these theories is

that a metaphor does not contain, or convey, coded messages, but works through “other intermediaries.” Rather, metaphor, like a joke or a picture, makes the hearer appreciate some fact without expressing, or “meaning,” that fact; as he says, a pill or a bump on the head would work just as well as a metaphor.

In spite of all of these virtues, Davidson’s theory of metaphor, like all all theories of “metaphorhood,” has its faults. The most significant is that if we say that any utterance with a metaphor is meaningless, then most of our utterances are meaningless. So even in a simple, every day case, like:

(33) “The leg of the chair is broken.”

Is meaningless even if the leg of the chair is broken because the utterance is metaphorical, even though the metaphor is “dead,” or equivalent to a literal utterance. This can go further by accounting for metaphors we use to understand concepts that we cannot otherwise describe: a current of electricity, illustrations of atoms, or treating the mind-brain as a computer. Since we use these metaphors to think, discuss, and engage on all of these topics, Davidson is committed to saying that these thoughts, discussions, and methods of engagement are meaningless; seeming to nullify, or at least undermining, a lot of work that we have done philosophically and scientifically about them.

In spite of this major flaw in Davidson’s theory, he does provide a method of dealing with a type of metaphor that no other theory covered in this work seems to be able to hand: poetic metaphors. Since we treat metaphor as a type of psychological effect and since there is no decoding of that cognitive content to be done, poetic metaphors, like all other metaphors for Davidson, simply incite in the hearer a psychological content (vision, feeling, etc.), and, therefore, are not a difficult subject for him to resolve.

Overall, Davidson's view treats metaphor as a pragmatic phenomenon; however, it is a much different kind from Searle and Grice's concepts of pragmatics. That is, instead of claiming that metaphors are linguistic by invoking some concept of extended meaning through conversational implicatures, Davidson claims that metaphors are causal; that is, they cause in the hearer some type of psychological effect. Therefore, Davidson's theory of metaphor shows us what the power of metaphor looks like when we treat it as causal and locate it in psychological, or perlocutionary, effects.

## Chapter 5: Relevance Theory

A Look into Contemporary Theories of Metaphor: a *Brief* Summary and Analysis of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's *Deflationary Account of Metaphor*

### Overview:

Sperber and Wilson assume that interpretive hypotheses about explicit content and implicatures are developed partly in parallel rather than in sequence, and stabilize when they are mutually adjusted so as to jointly confirm the hearer's expectations of relevance. And we are not, of course, suggesting that the hearer consciously goes through just the steps shown in the tables, with exactly those premises and conclusions. We are not making claims about exact sequences, consciousness, or the representational format of thought. We are making claims about factors which cause hearers to converge on an interpretation that—in the case where communication is successful—coincides with the one intended by the speaker.

Sperber and Wilson maintain that metaphors are not a distinct category of language use, let alone a discrete one. Are we then denying the obvious truth that metaphors often stand out as particularly creative and powerful uses of language? If not—and indeed we are not—how are these uses of language to be explained?

After presenting their deflationary account of metaphors, Sperber and Wilson put forward their Relevance Theory of language, which consists of 2 main principles:

- 1) Cognitive Principle of Relevance: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 8).

2) Communicative Principle of Relevance: Every act of inferential communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 9).

In practice, it seems that utterances achieve relevance by producing cognitive effects. They may have many cognitive effects or only a few, and these effects may be stronger or weaker. Sperber and Wilson go on to qualify this when they say:

A competent speaker must have good reason to suppose that what she says will be relevant to the hearer. The hearer himself may have given her such a reason, in particular by asking her a question, thereby letting her know that an answer would be relevant to him. Thus, if a stranger comes up to you in the street and asks what time it is, you can feel confident that it would be relevant to tell him the time, even if you neither know nor care exactly how it would be relevant, and are implicating nothing more the presumption of relevance that any utterance conveys about itself. (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 25)

In other words, in most conversations or discourses, the speaker cannot have good reason to think that her utterances will be relevant enough unless she has some positive idea of the cognitive effects they will achieve. From the hearer's perspective, it is quite often safe to assume that the speaker both expected and intended him to derive some of the implications that he does derive, for otherwise she could not reasonably have supposed that her utterance would be optimally relevant to him. These intended implications are implicatures of the utterance. An implicature may be more or less strongly implicated. The speaker may have in mind a specific implication on which the relevance of her utterance depends, and a strong intention that the hearer should derive it; in that case it is strongly implicated (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 25).

At the other extreme we have weak implicatures. Specifically, the speaker may have in mind a vague range of possible implications with roughly similar import, any subset of which would contribute to the relevance of her utterance, and a weak intention,

for any of the implications in that range, that the hearer should derive it; these are weak implicatures. Her intentions about the implicatures of her utterance may fall anywhere between these two extremes. The strength of an implicature is determined by the manifest strength of the speaker's intention that a specific implication should be derived (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 25). From a Relevance Theory perspective, the fact that these ideas have been activated suggests that they may be relevant, and the effort spent in activating them, however marginal, suggests that they should be relevant (otherwise, the effort would have been wasted, contrary to the presumption of optimal relevance) (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 28).

Relevance Theorists are *contextualists* about language. Briefly, this means that pragmatic processes have an impact on the truth-conditions of an utterance. Furthermore, Relevance Theory assumes that our utterances are largely semantically underdetermined. This assumption maintains that there is a big disconnect between the semantic content encoded in a sentence, and what is directly expressed by a speaker. Thus, even in rather typical, daily, literal utterances, pragmatic processes are said to "intrude." Take the following example:

(34) "It's loud."

What (34) means will depend on the context of utterance. What counts as loud may differ if we are in a library or a concert venue. In the latter, but not the former, the concept is "loosened." Consequently, we end up with an *ad hoc* concept LOUD\*.

Let us consider another example.

(35) "I had car troubles."

Suppose (35) was uttered to one's professor upon entering the classroom, late for a class. What is expressed is something richer than what is encoded. We may capture this in the following way:

(35b) "*Because I had car troubles this morning, I was unable to show up to class in time.*"

These are some examples of pragmatic processes of loosening and enrichment. In the former example, we have loosening, which broadens the encoded content. In the latter case, we have enrichment, which narrows the encoded content. Both examples are what Relevance Theorists refer to as "loose uses" of language. Relevance Theorists argue that metaphor is just an example of loosely speaking, in the same way we loosely speak by uttering (34) and (35) above.

The main proponents of Relevance Theory, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, put forth what they call a "Deflationary Account" of metaphors. The account is largely inspired by Grice, while departing significantly with Gricean pragmatics. Where Searle's Gricean account maintains that it is necessary to distinguish literal utterances from metaphorical ones, Sperber and Wilson claim that metaphor is not distinct from literal language:

We see metaphors as simply a range of cases at one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic interpretations. In our view, metaphorical interpretations are arrived at in the same way as these other interpretations. There is no mechanism specific to metaphor, no interesting generalization that applies only to them. (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 2)

Let us consider the familiar poetic metaphor: "Juliet is the sun." The metaphoric interpretation consists in constructing an *ad hoc* concept SUN\*. In this case, the concept sun is both enriched and loosened. It is enriched because from context, we know that Romeo refers to the rising sun. It is loosened, on the other hand because Romeo refers to

Juliet. These pragmatic processes provide a smooth transition from the literal to the intended meaning.

Metaphor, like other instances of loose talk, is understood to be directly expressed, as opposed to something that is inferred by the hearer (contrary to Grice and Searle). This is generalized across the board, so that no metaphoric meaning is the result of a two-stage process, whereby a hearer first identifies a problem with the utterance which prompts them to search for an alternative meaning.

Sperber and Wilson argue that they see the continuity among literal, loose, and metaphorical utterances as evidence not just that there is some degree of fuzziness or overlap among distinct categories, but that there are no genuinely distinct categories, at least from a descriptive, psycholinguistic, or pragmatic point of view. Even more important than the lack of clear boundaries is the fact that the same inferential procedure is used in interpreting all these different types of utterances (Sperber and Wilson, 2008; 18).

A feature of Relevance Theory is taking Grice's theory of conversation and reducing all of the principles down to one: the principle of *relevance*; this can be seen in metaphor interpretation, along with other forms of loose talk. The degree of relevance some input has is guided by two factors: cognitive effects and the processing effort needed to achieve these effects. Some input becomes more relevant if it begets greater cognitive effects. Because we tend to maximize relevance, a speaker and their audience will mutually assume optimal relevance in conversation. This was expressed above as the Communicative Principle of Relevance. Relevance Theory maintains that all meaning is inferred. Given that utterances are semantically underdetermined, inference guides the

hearer past the point of encoded content until the hearer's expectations of relevance are satisfied. At this point, the process may halt, or the hearer may continue to derive further implicatures, but all with lesser degrees of relevance.

### **Objections:**

One of the main objections to Relevance Theory is the plausibility of contextualism, which can be argued against by alternative theories, such as literalism and semantic minimalism.<sup>22</sup> This sort of criticism takes us well outside of the scope of this paper.<sup>23</sup>

Another major criticism is one that is launched by Elizabeth Camp (2008) who questions the applicability of the concept of loose use to highly imaginative, poetic, and open-ended metaphors. Consider an example from Auden, offered by Camp:

(36) "The hourglass whispered to the lion's paw."

It is not entirely clear what sort of *ad hoc* concepts are constructed to arrive at the intended meaning in this case. As a result, there is no clearly definable *ad hoc* concept that can be applied to the utterance itself. Since there is no *ad hoc* concept that applies to this metaphor, there seems to be an important type of metaphor that Relevance Theory is silent about. And since these types of metaphors are a non-trivial aspect of the phenomenon under investigation, we may consider Relevance Theory's deflationary account to be somewhat impoverished.

---

<sup>22</sup> Korta, Kepa and Perry, John, "Pragmatics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Camp's Contextualism, Metaphor, and What is Said (2006).

Finally, a consequence<sup>24</sup> of Sperber and Wilson's account of metaphor is that literal utterances are in no way ontologically distinct from loose or figurative utterances. This is not to say that literal utterances do not exist for Relevance Theorists. Rather, it means something more like literal utterances, like metaphorical utterances, are in no way special because they are on the continuum of meaning, both loose and narrow. Although this may seem obvious or inconsequential for Sperber and Wilson, it does seem difficult, uncomfortable, or at least unintuitive to accept that literal utterances are not ontologically distinct. Some philosophers have agreed with this sentiment, which is why some philosophers of language, such as Elizabeth Camp, are called Literalists. Therefore, a significant consequence of Relevance Theory is that one must accept that literal utterances are in no way ontologically distinct from non-literal utterances.

### **Virtues:**

Regarding communication, Relevance Theory offers a universal theory of communication that does a good job of accounting for a great deal of our linguistic communication. Specifically, the global mechanisms of seeking optimal relevance can be applied to account for many cases considered to be loose uses of language. Regarding metaphor, one of the main advantages of the theory places it on par with literal expressions. Because we use literal utterances for making truth evaluable assertions, we use metaphorical utterances to make similar assertions. In other words, if example such as (34) and (35) can be used to make assertions with definite truth-value, then (36) can also be used to do the same thing.

---

<sup>24</sup> I say consequence here because it is not clear that Sperber and Wilson would see this as an objection, but, rather, simply a fact of either language or the price one has to pay for a consistent theory of language.

## Conclusion:

Overall, Relevance Theory takes Grice's "theory of conversation," or philosophy of language, and flips it on its head by reducing his maxims down to one: the maxim of relation: be relevant. However, reducing Grice's maxims down to the maxim of relevance is deceptive because it seems simpler than it actually is; it requires Sperber and Wilson to do a lot of explanatory work, whether it be through their cognitive and cooperative principles of relevance, *ad hoc* concepts, and, most important for our project, the continuum of meaning.

By introducing the continuum of narrow and loose speak, Relevance theorists provide a new, unique way of thinking about philosophy of language, especially as it relates to metaphor. The continuum consists of narrowing on one end and broadening on the other. On this continuum are literal, loose, hyperbolic, and metaphorical interpretations of utterances. Moreover, by introducing this continuum, Sperber and Wilson demonstrate how there is no ontological divide, or distinction, between literal and figurative utterances; rather, they are simply instances of narrowing and broadening—literal being the narrowest instance on the continuum and metaphor being the broadest.

The biggest draw for Relevance Theory is that it seems to be the theory of language that accounts for most features of our linguistic communication, probably more features than any other theory presented in this work; however, it has its issues. Poetic metaphors seem incompatible with Relevance Theory's idea of *ad hoc* concepts in that it is unclear what *ad hoc* concepts can apply to many poetic metaphors. Moreover, an additional issue, or at least a consequence, is that, if we endorse Relevance Theory, we have to submit that

there is no ontological distinction between literal utterances and non-literal utterances because literal utterances are simply “enriched” utterances on one end of the continuum. Although this may simply be a factor of Relevance Theory, or even language at large, it seems, at least for some, like a hard pill to swallow. Regardless, of these factors, Relevance Theory is a good contemporary theory of language that seems to locate the power of metaphor in cognitive effects and the laws that govern communication.

## Chapter 6: Closing Thoughts and Conclusion

### The Takeaway: Where Does the Power of Metaphor Lie?

#### Overview:

We have analyzed three seminal works covering traditional discourse on metaphor, took a crack at the leading contemporary theory of metaphor to show how the conversation has developed, and attempted to account for the three theories and accommodate for their faults. Black's interactionist theory of metaphor locates the power of metaphor at the level of semantics. The issue with Black's theory is that, along with overburdening semantics, he does not give an account as to how we arrive at the system of associated commonplaces. However, if Black had pragmatics to lean on at the time that he wrote *Metaphor*, these difficulties may have been avoided.

An important virtue of the semantic theory of metaphor is that we use the linguistic meaning of a metaphorical utterance to restrict the possible interpretations of a metaphor. Again, so when we have a metaphorical utterance like (2), we restrict our interpretation of the metaphor to the system of associated commonplaces surrounding "snake" as it applies to Sam. Moving forward, Black's interactionist theory of metaphor provides a strong method of interpreting metaphor, and a sound introduction of the topic of metaphor into the realm of serious philosophical conversation.

From here we went to Searle's theory of metaphor, which sought to locate the power of metaphor at the level of pragmatics. The greatest appeal for Searle's account of metaphor is that it follows an established, and generally accepted system of language in that it mirrors Grice's theory of communication. As such, by drawing parallels between metaphor, Grice's "what is said," and conversational implicatures, we learn a lot about

the nature of metaphor; that is, what are some of the defining features of metaphor. What I take the most significant takeaway from this theory is: metaphors are always cancellable. For example, when I say something like (2), one could take me to be saying, or implicating, something like Sam is sneaky, etc.; however, I can cancel this implicature by saying something like “no, you misunderstand me. Sam is a snake because he sheds his skin; he changes opinions.” Therefore, metaphors are cancellable.

There are some issues with Searle’s theory of metaphor, and the pragmatic view in general. First, Searle does not give an account of how we come to know these extended meanings of metaphor. Moreover, Searle’s view does not seem to distinguish metaphor from other types of figurative language. Finally, an objection posed against Searle, and the pragmatists in general, is the twice-true and twice-apt metaphor. In spite of these objections to Searle, the traditional pragmatic view of metaphor makes a clear, intuitive case for why metaphor is undeniably a pragmatic phenomenon.

In Davidson, we saw a new take on pragmatics in that we treated metaphors as causal instead of linguistic. That is, instead of saying that metaphors have encoded implicatures or extended meanings, metaphors simply cause in us some type of psychological effects (thoughts, feelings, visions, etc.). An important distinction that Davidson makes is something having meaning versus something being meaningful. When Davidson says that metaphors are meaningful, he means that the thoughts, feelings, visions that they cause are meaningful to us; however, this is often confused as the “meaning” or linguistic meaning, of a metaphor. As a result, Davidson’s theory of metaphor is the only theory of metaphor analyzed in this work that provides an account for poetic metaphors like (4) and (21). In spite of these virtues of Davidson’s theory of

metaphor, there are some issues. The most significant objection that Davidson does not give an account for seems to be the problem of “dead metaphors,” or when the linguistic meaning of an utterance *is* the metaphor, like in (33). With this in mind, so much of our utterances are metaphorical. If, as Davidson claims, all our metaphorical utterances are meaningless, then most of our utterances in general are meaningless. Finally, by way of example, when we use a metaphor in conversation, we seem to pick up on the meanings of the metaphor and operate on those meanings successfully, which we have seen in example (32). Davidson may respond to this example by claiming that, in conversation, we are operating on the same psychological effects of the metaphor that are “meaningful” to us—the same feelings, visions, etc.—that does not change the “meaning” of the words used in the metaphor and are, therefore, in no way special. Even so, asserting that most of our utterances are meaningless because they are so rich with metaphor *and* the issue of “dead” metaphors pose too significant of a problem for Davidson. Therefore, Davidson’s “brute force” theory of metaphor shows us what metaphor looks like when we locate its power in their perlocutionary, or psychological, effects.

Finally, we briefly tackled a contemporary take on metaphor in Relevance Theory. By putting language on a continuum of meaning, Relevance Theory has been able to account for most of the features of linguistic communication: metaphor, literal language, hyperbole, and so on. However, there are some issues with Relevance theory. Beyond it being difficult to apply *ad hoc* concepts to poetic metaphors, some philosophers find it difficult to accept that, as Sperber and Wilson assert, there is no ontological distinction between figurative and literal utterances because they all exist on the continuum of loose and narrow uses of language. Nonetheless, Relevance Theory

provides us with an attempt to accommodate for the virtues and objections of the theories before it in a contemporary context. Moreover, Relevance Theory seems to provide us with a view that locates the power of metaphor on multiple levels; namely, the features of pragmatics that govern communication—i.e., the maxim of relevance—and cognitive processes.

A lingering issue seems to be that many of these theories of metaphor can accommodate for different types of metaphor, but not metaphor as a single concept. For example, Davidson's theory can account for poetic metaphors where others cannot. This has led me to believe perhaps we may have made a mistake by reducing the figure of speech under a single umbrella term "metaphor" and attempted to construct one, unified theory when we should be constructing theories of its constitutive parts. In other words, if we parse out metaphors into different categories,<sup>25</sup> then perhaps attempts to pin down the concept would be more successful.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

It seems that metaphor is the most elusive phenomenon among forms of figurative speech. As a result, metaphor has been difficult for philosophers to capture in a single theory. Since its resurgence into serious philosophical discussion by Max Black, we have seen several theorists attempt to pin down the concept of metaphor into one consistent theory. In hopes of making some progress in the debate, we have undertaken this thesis as a chance to narrow the notion down from this huge, all-encompassing concept—"metaphor"—down to a single feature—its "power." By doing this, we have situated the discussion into four fields: those who locate the power of metaphor at the level of

---

<sup>25</sup> Such as "dead metaphors," "poetic metaphors," "conventional metaphors," and so on.

semantics, those who locate it at the level of pragmatics, those who locate it at the level of perlocutionary effects, and those who have tried to locate it on multiple levels.

Overall, it seems that the power of metaphor does not belong to any one particular area—semantics, pragmatics, or cognitive effects—exclusively. It seems necessary for metaphor to be, at the very least, minimally semantic to restrict the possible number of interpretations of a metaphor; to keep them from being entirely subjective or entirely reduced to psychological effects.<sup>26</sup> It seems just as necessary to insist that metaphors follow some pragmatic rules like we saw in Searle because then metaphors have some clearly defined features; namely, that they act like conversational implicatures in that they are usually, if not always, cancelable. Finally, to account for poetic metaphors, metaphor must, in some sense, be regarded as a psychological phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, each of these theories have very clear problems that need to be accounted for. By introducing Relevance Theory, we have situated the conversation in a contemporary setting and shown one of many ways that theorists have tried to account for these problems all at once.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Relevance Theory has not only presented a strong theory of metaphor, but also a theory of language that accounts for many features of our linguistic communication. However, this theory has its issues as well. Like Black and Searle, Sperber and Wilson have not accounted for the blind spot common to most theories of metaphor that we have discussed: poetic metaphor. In addition, Relevance Theory gives up the ontological divide between figurative and non-figurative uses of language, which seems like a pill too big for me to swallow, but, for some, this may be

---

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Camp calls these meanings “semantically encoded” (Camp, 2008; 16).

<sup>27</sup> Of course, these are not the only virtues of each theory.

<sup>28</sup> Although Relevance Theory attempts to account for these problems by jettisoning the notion of semantics that we committed ourselves to at the outset of our investigation.

dismissed as either a bias or simply as something we must do for a consistent theory of language.

### List of Numbered Examples

- 1) "Bill is a bulldozer."
- 2) "Sam is a snake."
- 3) "Juliet is the sun."
- 4) "Honour is a mere scutcheon."
- 5) "Wikipedia is a gold mine."
- 6) "Man is a wolf."
- 7) "Brenda is a Saint."
- 8) "Nic is a lion."
- 9) "Nic is a tank."
- 10) "Those images that yet/Fresh images beget,/That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea."
- 11) "Ottawa is battery acid."
- 12) "I'm freezing."
- 13) "Donald Trump is a politician, but he's honest."
- 14) "Donald Trump is a politician, therefore he is honest."
- 15) "Donald Trump is a politician, and he is honest."
- 16) "Donald Trump's being honest follows from his being a politician."
- 17) "Lawyers are snakes."
- 18) "No they're not, some are good people!"
- 19) "No, I meant that they can change, like, shed their skin."
- 20) "Sam is a pig."

- 21) "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets/his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more."
- 22) "No man is an island."
- 23) "Jesus was a carpenter."
- 24) "The world is a vampire."
- 25) "Trevor is a fortress."
- 26) "Trevor is a bull."
- 27) "When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/Lends the tongue vows."
- 28) "'Hope' is the thing with feathers -/That perches in the soul -/And sings the tune without the words -/And never stops - at all -"
- 29) "Frank is a machine."
- 30) "Frank is a workhorse."
- 31) "He is a hummingbird."
- 32) "New York City is a pressure cooker."
- 33) "The leg of the chair is broken."
- 34) "It's loud."
- 35) "I had car troubles."
- 35b) "*Because I had car troubles this morning, I was unable to show up to class in time.*"
- 36) "The hourglass whispered to the lion's paw."

## Bibliography

- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Translated by Ingram Bywater. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Black, Max. "Metaphor." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series* 55 (1954-1955): 273-94. *JSTOR*.
- Black, Max. "More about metaphor." *Models and Metaphors* (1962). Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Camp, Elisabeth. (2006), Contextualism, Metaphor, and What is Said. *Mind & Language*, 21: 280–309.
- Camp, Elisabeth Maura. *Saying and Seeing-as: The Linguistic Uses and Cognitive Effects of Metaphor*. Berkeley: U of California, 2003.
- Camp, Elisabeth. "Showing, Telling and Seeing: Metaphor and "Poetic" Language." *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication* 3 (2008): 1-24. Web.
- Davidson, Donald. 1978. "What Metaphors Mean." In S. Sacks (ed.), *On Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davidson, Donald, and Gilbert Harman. *Semantics of Natural Language*. 2nd ed. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979.
- Grice, H. Paul, 1957, "Meaning," *Philosophical Review* 66: 377–88. Reprinted in H. P. Grice, 1989, pp. 213–23.
- Hills, David, "Metaphor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Korta, Kapa and Perry, John, "Pragmatics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Lycan, William G. *Philosophy of language: a contemporary introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Nogales, Patti D. *Metaphorically speaking*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 1999.
- Ortony, Andrew. *Metaphor and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1993.
- Richards, Ivor A., 1936, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, John. (1979): *Metaphor*. In: Ortony, A. (ed.): *Metaphor and Thought*. First Ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.