

Metaphors: Concept-Family in Context

Marina Bakalova, Theodor Kujumdjieff*

Abstract

In this article we offer a new explanation of metaphors based upon Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance and language games. We argue that metaphor does not exist per se but only in a given context. It is a connection between two concept-families established by the most appropriate representatives of each family. The most appropriate representatives are promoted on grounds of associations that limit the event to the standard of the rules in a language game. Context is defined as associations, goals and knowledge about the rules of the language game.

1. Introduction

Metaphor is being a perennial enigma for researchers in different fields. It is usually regarded either as a concept building device or as a mere decorative element of speech. We support the first assumption and treat metaphor as a means by which the meaning of a given concept can be changed. In this article we present a view based upon Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance and language games. Members of two concept-families are linked with each other by associations that obtain an equivalent meaning within a certain context and serve as a basis for metaphor. We call these members "most appropriate representatives" from the point of view of participants in a common language game. Our approach differs from the views considered in stressing upon the impact of context in metaphor comprehension. We assume context to be a limited event in the frames of a language game. Thus a football match is an event into the language game "football". Metaphors hinges basically upon cognitive mechanisms of associations¹. Besides contextually equivalent meaning includes the conditions of a common goal and knowledge about the rules of the game.

Our approach is contrary to analogy-based explanations, since in order to create a metaphor no structural resemblance between the two concepts is necessary. Adopting the mechanism of associations we account for the dynamics of concept fields as well as for the immediate connection between their members. Depending on context, different connections can be established which means that different metaphors can be created. In a static structure, metaphors would be predictable and self-evident, which is not the case.

2. Views upon Metaphor

A metaphor consists of two components linked together that usually do not belong to the same lexical field. For example: "My job is a jail". Meaning is transferred from the first concept (ground) to the second (target). Depending on the view they are named *tenor* and *vehicle*; *frame* and *focus*; *primary subject* and *secondary subject* of the metaphor.

Substitutional view: Metaphor is regarded as a substitution of a literal expression by another term. The origins of this view can be found in Aristotle's "Poetics". In the above example "jail" substitutes a literal description of the "job". But in many cases a literal expression for a metaphor does not exist:

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes."
(T.S: Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)

In addition some expressions can be understood metaphorically or literally, depending on the situation in which it has been used: "My son is still a child."

Comparison view: This view emphasizes the similarities or analogies, that exist between two different domains. Seen that way a metaphor is an elliptical simile, without the connection element "like" as "My job is like a jail." The main objection against this view is that metaphors can be replaced by a simile in an insignificant number of cases.

Interactive view: Black (1962 pp. 44-45) claims that metaphor is to be understood as interaction between primary and secondary subject. A metaphor uses statements about the secondary subject by choosing, underlining or omitting features in order to reorganise the system of the primary subject; this leads to a meaning shift in lexemes. But there is no elementary basis to determine the lexeme meaning shift, i.e. it is still not clear why some metaphors are better than others.

Class-inclusion functions: This view is presented by Glucksberg and Keysar 1990. The topic "job" is assigned to a category of punishing unpleasant activities in a limited place by means of the vehicle "jail", which refers to this category as its prototype. This explanation of metaphors is not sufficient, since no prototype for a category exists per se. A category-member becomes the most appropriate representative only within a specific context. The class inclusion can not explain why "John is a tiger!" is sometimes a better metaphor than "John is a lion!". It also fails to account for poetic metaphors.

3. Metaphors, Concept-families and Context

We propose a view that denies the existence of a metaphor² per se. Let us take the example: "John is a lion on the playground". It is a connection not only between two

concepts rather between two concept-families. In such a metaphor there are potentially many candidates sharing family resemblance with "lion" competing for the role of the secondary subject: "John is a tiger!", "John is a panther!"... However only one of them is appropriate regarding the situation.

Concept families are elements connected in a mental space. In creating metaphor the mental representations of primary and secondary subjects build a relation of equivalence that connects two concept families. This equivalence is not made up arbitrary but is provoked by context and also connects concept-families that are sometimes totally different in their structure and number of elements. In this sense it can be said that metaphors are not analogies. We discuss this topic later on.

Context serves as a utility for choosing the most appropriate representative of a concept-family for the role of the secondary subject. Thus our first claim is that a metaphor is a connection between two concept-families. The second claim is that the connection is between *elements* of the two families, which become the most appropriate representatives in the context of a particular event determined by a language game.

How is context to be defined and used in understanding metaphors? Let us consider the following example. Two persons watch a football match at the stadium. One of them does not know the rules of the football game, neither the players nor the usual reactions of the spectators. We call him "the novice". The other one knows the game well and he is "the expert". Is it possible for the novice to understand the metaphor uttered later on: "John was a lion on the playground"? Most probably he will understand the metaphor only partially - in as far as the overall behaviour of John resembles that of a lion and the novice makes certain associations in his mind. The novice experiences the event but lacks knowledge about the rules. Both spectators are acting not in the same language game. If they meet another expert who has not watched the match then the second expert would as well not understand the metaphor "John was a lion on the playground.". Only after explaining to him what the situation on the playground was, could he grasp what is meant by this expression. The second expert lacks the information about the event, i.e. the context is not known to him, although he knows the rules of the game. The novice however is more likely to understand the metaphor since he has witnessed the game and is capable of making some associations, whereas the second expert is unable to do so. Therefore rules alone are not sufficient neither for establishing nor for understanding metaphors. They have to be connected to certain associations made during the event. On their part the associations have to correspond to the rules of a particular language game in order to result in a relevant metaphor. The rules serve as a standard for restricting the associations made by which the most appropriate representative of the concept-family is projected.

On the other hand, in order to be in the same context, the goal of all the participants must be the same. Let us consider another example. In a classroom a teacher asks a girl, to which he is attracted, to prove a mathematical theorem. The goal of the young lady is to prove the theorem. The teacher's goal has been to enjoy her figure in front of the blackboard. The girl writes a too long proof. Another student thinks of a shorter one and makes the remark: "You have written a novel instead of a haiku!" The teacher won't understand this metaphor unless he switches from the context of the girl's figure to the context of the proof. The event restricts the goals and influences the associations of the participants. Associations reflect the state of mind and influences thinking and language comprehension. They are a measurable psychological factor.³ Finally we state that with respect to metaphor context comprises knowledge of rules, associations and common goals for all participants in the event.

Our approach accounts for poetic metaphors as well. The same elements of context are used. In the example:

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes."
(T.S: Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)

the notion of back rubbing evokes the association of a cat sneaking behind the window. The presence of the window concept supports the feeling of a cat out there. Although poetry can not be experienced identically, a certain mood that unites most of the readers can be expected.

The event in this case is the reading of poetry - the mood of the reader, her perceptions. All these factors will influence her associations. The goals could be different - analysis of the poem, presenting it to the audience or simply enjoying it. These goals will partially be identical with the goals of the poet. The common associations here are of crucial importance, since if the associations differ too much, the secondary subject may remain hidden for the reader. The rules of the language game in this case are the basic principles of writing and reading poetry. The lack of one of the elements of context would hinder the reader in understanding poetic metaphors.

4. Conclusion

We show that differentia specifica of a metaphor is not to be found in structural similarity, but rather in the more flexible mechanism of associative links, that is to account for the metaphoric effect. This mechanism also explains why people estimate some concept connections as more appropriate than others. We think that Wittgenstein's family resemblance and language games underlie the definition of context, essential for understanding metaphors, both common and poetic.

Literature

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Endnotes

- * Authors' address: theo.rilski@web.de
- 1 The presentation of research on associations is not the subject of this article.
- 2 when discussing metaphors we use the terms *primary* and *secondary subject*.
- 3 See the model of language comprehension based upon associations (Slavova, Kujumdjieff 2000).