

Boundary of Metaphors-Rewrite

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A recurring issue in anthropology is the lack of clear definition on the subject matter under discussion: it is difficult to make a definitive argument about rituals if no one really know what the term “ritual” means? Other subjects such as “society” and “culture” face the same problem. People generally have a sense of what culture is; but if asked to define the term, most would have trouble and few could come up with answers that seem complete even to themselves let alone those around them. However, because these definitions are controversial, scholars are usually aware of the limitations and can construct their work accordingly (if they wish). Metaphors are slightly different. Most (educated) people “know” what a metaphor is: it is, plainly put, one thing used to represent another, similar thing. Therefore, people make liberal use of the term without giving it much thought. But in practice, metaphor is not clearly defined; or rather the “clear” definition leaves a large gray area open to interpretation.

The *Webster's Dictionary* defines metaphor as “a figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used for one thing is applied to another.” This seems relatively straightforward, especially for a dictionary definition. Take for example the two sentences “he is tall” and “she is fuming.” The former is a statement of height where as the latter is a metaphor drawing a comparison between anger and fire. The difference seems clear cut, but what if I tell you that the “tall” guy has a height of five feet and four inches. Suddenly, you may realize that “tall” is actually used to implicitly express a sense of greatness and strength; he is tall not physically but metaphorically. In a similar way, if a girl is smoking a cigarette than

she may be literally “fuming” not metaphorically. But what if the girl is angry and smoking at the same time? The meaning of the sentence gets more complicated. This shows that metaphor is not always easy to identify. An “implied comparison” means that the reader or listener have to draw the connection. And the gap between the original intention and receiver’s understanding is not always easy to fill.

One may argue that the above example only deals with the recognition of metaphor, not its definition. But the two is tightly linked. Lets look into the idea that “the heart is a pump.”* Prior to the development of the mechanical pump people found it very difficult to describe how the heart functions. Thereafter, the heart is mostly described in association with the pump. The question is, is the heart a pump in the metaphorical sense? We can argue that the heart is by definition a pump made of flesh and blood or that a pump is by definition something which maneuvers the flow of liquid and the heart and the mechanical pump are only specific types of the generic pump. There are certainly many comparisons that could be implied between heart and pump, but does that mean it is a metaphor? Man and the generic primate can also be described in much the same way, but saying that “man is a primate” is not a metaphor since man is type of primate.

So perhaps the metaphor lies in the comparison between the heart and the mechanical pump much like one would compare man to another primate like the monkey? But even this approach has its problems. Consider the possibility that the inventor of the first mechanical pump based his design on a heart. (This is very probable since humans derive knowledge from what already exists in nature.) In this case, the mechanical pump would be nothing more than a simplified heart made of nuts and bolts. This idea only

* This is taken from MIT course 21A.212 Spring 2004 lectures.

gets more and more confusing and goes to show just how difficult the classification of metaphor can be.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson further extended the complexity of metaphors by suggesting that sometimes, “it is far more difficult to see that there is anything hidden by the metaphor or even to see that there is a metaphor here at all” (11). But if we are using a metaphor without realizing then is it still a metaphor? Lets consider a hypothetical situation. Long ago there lived a king named Hexar who had six toes on one of his foot. Ever since, people started to refer to a six-toed foot as a hexar. Now years have passed, and people have long forgotten about King Hexar. The dictionary defines hexar as a foot with six toes. In this case is hexar a metaphor? Historically, yes. But people in the present do not mean to imply a comparison when using the word; they are simply using vocabulary by definition; and the word is no longer used in association with King Hexar and always in association with six toes. So then are the people using a metaphor unconsciously or are they using metaphor at all? Can something be called a metaphor if the users never meant to imply a comparison and the receiver never perceived a comparison?

Lakoff and Johnson also provided examples of imbedded metaphors such as argument is war, time is money, ideas are objects, etc. The detail analysis of these examples often walk a thin line between metaphor and the fundamental structure of language and thought, which is not surprising since they believe “our conceptual system is largely metaphorical” (3). This adds yet another layer of complexity to metaphor since it is no longer just a form of expression but a form of conception as well. For instance, they defended the “argument is war” example by pointing out that war related terms such

as defense, weakness, target, win, lose, and strategy are used to describe argument. First notice that, much like the case of pump and heart, argument could be defined as a type of war, a verbal war. Thus argument and war could be described in the same way without a metaphorical comparison.

Furthermore, since argument and war are similar, it is inevitable that they are described by the same terms. A cheetah can run and a human can run, but saying that the human is running does not mean that s/he is compared to a cheetah; thus, a person can be defensive in both war and argument without implicitly comparing the two. Defense is simply an action on its own that can be applied to scenarios such as argument and war. In fact, does anyone know whether the word defense was first used in conjunction with war or argument or some other concept? Has anyone counted whether it is used more often with war or argument? If no, then how can we say defense is a term of war?

Finally, consider the case where something previously unknown, such as an alien, came into the world. How would we describe the alien and everything about it? Whatever it is like, the description must be made up of words already existing in the language (whichever language it may be) because we do not know another way. Even if new terms were created for this alien, these terms would in turn be defined with words in the current language. Since these words are already associated with something in our world, are we implicitly comparing that something with the alien? (If we use words such as defense or strategy in association with an alien action, does that mean we are making a metaphorical comparison between war and this alien's action?)

In "The Culture Basis of Metaphor," Naomi Quinn states her own views on metaphors. Unlike Lakoff and Johnson, Quinn believes that metaphors are driven by

culture; metaphors do not structure understanding but are chosen to “satisfy mappings onto already existing cultural understandings” (65). As example, she brought forth eight general metaphorical categories associated with marriage: sharedness, lastingness, mutual benefit, compatibility, difficulty, effort, success/failure, and risk. She argues that we do not associate any of these traits to marriage because they are fundamentally linked; instead, these metaphors reflect culture beliefs of what marriage is like. Personally, I find this argument easier to accept than that of Lakoff and Johnson’s. And the acceptance of one or the other will certainly alter the line inside which we find metaphor. However, how can we ‘proof’ that either one is closer to the ‘true’ definition of metaphor? How do we know what is and what isn’t a metaphor?

Is metaphor the answer to Ontology? Does it define how we perceive being and existence? If everything is in someway a metaphor then does the word metaphor still carry a meaning? If not, then what is a metaphor, and where are its boundaries? These questions are abstract but significant. They are also not specific to only metaphors: many of the same questions and arguments can be carried over to other forms of tropes. Take for example metonyms. Does the mention of things linked to each other necessarily imply a metonymical comparison? What if two things used to be associated with each other in the distant past but have long since lost that connection? This essay does not answer these questions. Its goal is to simply point out that writers should remain mindful of the gray boundary of what constitutes metaphor and be clear to themselves and readers what they mean when using the word until and unless a strict definition can be established.

References

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