

Prompt 5: Prop-Oriented Make-Believe

Prop-Oriented Make-Believe is part of an idea Walton uses to help us understand how metaphors convey meaning. His theory is that, when a speaker uses a metaphor, they are opting to play a game - to imagine that reality matches the selected metaphor, and to speak in such a way that reflects this pretense. The speaker meaning is in the comparison between actions/ contents or objects/ props in the game and in real-life. Framing the meaning-conveyance mechanism in metaphor as a game involving pretense is convincing because it allows for productive metaphor usage (by extrapolating based on the world in the game to new scenarios), and distinguishes a metaphor from an idiom, since an idiom, although also apparently involving some kind of non-literal speech, is more like a word than a game, since its parts are mostly invariant (not to say that there aren't phrases which fall in between the two extremes of "word"-like and "game"-like).

Specifically, the "prop-oriented" part of Walton's theory is intended to distinguish metaphors whose focus is on using traits of a game world to talk about the real world from metaphors whose focus is on the relations that form in a game world as a result of the pretense (this is called "content-oriented" make-believe). The focus in a prop-oriented metaphor is on the props it involves rather than on the fictional world that is generated in order to locate the metaphor.

An example of how prop-oriented versus content-oriented make-believe works are these two metaphors:

(a) Person 1: "What are you doing after work? Want to go get drinks with me, Eliza, and Jerry?"

(b) Person 2: "Well, you know the ol' ball and chain... I think I'd better go right home."

(c) Person 1: “Yes, having a ball and chain around your ankle sure limits your options; you can’t drag all that weight all the way to the pub.”

(d) Person 2: “Maybe I’ll call my partner and tell him I have a meeting tonight... I do get tired of all that weight.”

In this metaphor, Person 2 refers to his spouse as a “ball and chain” because this metaphor/ idiom (it’s extremely cliched, so in (b) it’s hard to tell how exactly it’s being used) refers to a spouse who is restricting his partner’s actions, or otherwise spoiling the fun by acting like a restraint. But in (c), Person 1 is using the metaphor productively, continuing to pretend that Person 2 has a ball and chain around his ankle in order to express his sympathy with his friend’s inability to join him. The metaphor is clearly productive because the words are not part of a memorized template, and are not even close to a memorized template (for the “ball and chain” metaphor) in the second matrix clause of the sentence (after the semi-colon). The idea that Person 2’s spouse is preventing him from going to the pub by weighing him down and making it harder for him to physically get there, is an extrapolation based on the world created by the use of the “ball and chain” metaphor in (b). The conversation is focused on Person 2’s spouse’s restrictive attitude or behaviour, rather than on the world in which Person 2 has a restraint literally around his ankle, so the pretend is prop-based rather than content based. This is emphasized by (d), which underscores what Person 2 is thinking about. [Note: English has no gender-neutral singular non-arbitrary pronouns, so I used “his” and “him”. I was trying to avoid sexism by using “spouse” and “partner”, but... it was impossible to entirely avoid gender specificity.]

However, imagine that the conversation had gone somewhat differently - imagine that instead of (d), after (c) the conversation had proceeded this way:

(e) Person 2: “Not only is my steel shackle heavy; it’s cold, too.”

(f) Person 1: “Don’t fall in a lake with that thing on!”

In this metaphor, Person 2, in (e), continues to speak metaphorically about his spouse, ascribing the property of frigidity or callousness or some such thing with the metaphor about coldness. He's still using the ball and chain as a prop to refer to properties of his spouse. But in (f), Person 1 introduces content-oriented metaphor by saying that Person 2 ought to be careful, since in a world in which Person 2 wears a heavy ball and chain around his ankle, to fall into a lake would be deadly (because he'd drown).

In fact, the contrast between the content-oriented versus the prop-oriented usage of the above "ball and chain" metaphor is what makes (f) appropriate as a joke: invoking the Gricean maxims, Person 1 can say (f) by "uncooperatively" interpreting (a) - (e) as being content-oriented instead of prop-oriented metaphors; the willful misinterpretation (as (a) - (e) being about the world in which Person 2 has a shackle on his leg) that Person 1 assumes in order to license his saying (f) is an intentional violation of the Cooperative Principle in order to derive humor. (Although, I can't explain why being "incorrect" and unexpected makes (f) funny.)

Additionally, the above examples show that prop-oriented and content-oriented make-believe needn't be segregated; a metaphor might switch between the two as the speakers interact, as above, or even as one speaker changes what he intends to talk about/ why he intends to talk about it.

Another example of how prop-oriented metaphor works is this sentence:

(g) "The train station is off the road near that cluster of boulders; turn left at the coke bottle."

The metaphor of "that boulder is a coke bottle" is used in order to make it clear at which juncture in the real world the listener should turn left to find the train station. The speaker is pretending that the boulder is a coke bottle in order to establish the game world in which his directional reference makes sense (is true). In Walton's terminology, it is "fictional" that the boulder is a coke bottle - in other words, it is true in the game world that the boulder is a coke bottle, and the speaker pretends to assert that the real world and the game world are the same. This

terminology clarifies the relationship/ mapping between the truth values of propositions (made in sentences) in the game world and in the real world. The metaphor reflects the juxtaposition of the two worlds, and to use the metaphor is to clue the listener into the two worlds the speaker has in mind (which he is pretending are one world -- the real world).

In the cases mentioned in (a) - (g), the speaker is aware of the pretense in which he is engaging to some extent; it's reasonable to imagine that when the speaker says (g), he imagines the image of a coke bottle and in some way compares it to the boulder he intends to refer to. Similarly, although the speaker in (b) may or may not have pictured the ball and chain or pretended to imagine his spouse as a weight around his ankle -- since he may have been using the idiom or the metaphor -- in (c) it seems reasonable that the speaker imagines his friend trudging awkwardly towards the pub, encumbered by a ball and chain. To what extent these images are fleshed out is unclear, as is how much that question is one of speaker variance versus universal mechanism.

However, it seems inarguable that sometimes when a speaker uses a metaphor he realizes that he engages in a kind of make-believe, especially in the case of productive and lengthy metaphors. On the other hand, there are some metaphors which speakers employ without their recognition of the pretense being obvious. For example, when a speaker uses a "space-as-time" metaphor to say:

(h) "Let's move the meeting up to Thursday",

or when a speaker says:

(i) "I destroyed his argument",

it's not obvious that the speaker is thinking about the flow of time as spatial or of argument as war. In fact, in (h) the speaker may be picturing his calendar and in (i) he might be picturing the scene as it actually took place, so invoking the idea of imagery in his head to show that he is cognizant of the pretense won't work at all.

The question of what exactly the speaker realizes (self-consciously) that he is doing gets even muddier when you consider word-internal metaphor or number usage. By “word-internal” metaphor, I mean the non-literal use of a word or part of a word (which often eventually becomes the standard usage). The historical process of meaning migration could be explained by mistakes in learning - a speaker misinterprets a metaphorical use of the word as a literal use of the word - or by a kind of co-opting process in which speakers stretch the meaning of a word to new cases by making the concept it defines more abstract over time (distilling the key aspect of the word’s meaning and discarding the concrete trapping which encumbered the word by tying it closely to its original cases).

In order to clarify the second framing of word-internal metaphor, consider the example of the word “rich”. Let’s say that the first time “rich” became commonly used in the English language, it was used to mean “owning a lot of valuable assets” (where the valuable assets are literally the kind of thing a human can own and trade or sell). [Imagine there is a pointer from “rich” to however we represent in thought “owning a lot of valuable assets”.] Eventually, say that someone intentionally used it to describe food, as in,

(j) “This food is rich in flavor”,

meaning that the food has the quality of “owning a lot of flavor.” In Walton’s theory, this speaker pretended that the food owned a lot of the valuable asset of flavor. [Imagine there is a pointer from “rich” to “owning a lot of valuable assets (in the case of a human)” and to “owning a lot of flavor (in the case of food)”.] When a speaker coins the usage “this music has a rich texture” and “this color is rich”, new pointers are added. Speakers stretch the concept of “owning a valuable asset” to include metaphorical kinds of ownership and metaphorical kinds of value and metaphorical kinds of asset. The mental representation that is built up is something like “rich” and then a series of pointers to “definitions”. If it becomes easier to come up with and successfully introduce new “definitions” of rich as more definitions accumulate, then we might want to say that the definitions are cross-linked with each other, and that as more and more

things with greater variety become the sort of things to which we can apply “rich”, the more generously we allow “rich” to apply to novel things.

We could also say that after some number of “definitions”, we erase the restrictive qualities of the definition which cause us to add a new pointer/ entry every time we encounter a novel use of “rich”. In other words, after we hear “rich in property”, “rich in color”, and “rich in flavor”, we amend the definition to something like:

(k) “metaphorical or literal possession of metaphorical or literal valuable properties in metaphorical or literal abundance”.

Then novel uses of rich no longer cause us to add new entries (unless they this revised definition) -- we have one pointer from the word “rich” to its stored meaning.

However, somehow speakers agree which properties of a word’s definition are the innate or unalterable ones, and which are flexible. When the word “rich” was first introduced (in this fictional account), it was used exclusively in the context of rich people owning property, gold, jewels (that kind of valuable). People used it this way exclusively before the first extended/ metaphorical use was introduced and caught on. But eventually, more and more metaphorical uses were introduced, which whittled the meaning into its irreducible final version (k). Somehow this (k) seems to be the deepest or core meaning of what it means to be “rich”. Was (k) there in the mental representation all along, then, but hidden? Is (k) some kind of Fregean concept which exists (in the architecture of our minds) for us to eventually arrive at? Or maybe (k) was coined when “rich” was first coined, but it could only be accessed via a certain context, so speakers were unaware (consciously) of (k) as distinct from “owning a lot of valuable property”. [In the analogy of pointers between words and mental representations of meaning, this might look like “rich” → human, own, valued property (specifying context) → (k); as we added metaphorical uses, we added the middle node; eventually, somehow we knew to eliminate the set of middle nodes and take a path directly to (k).]

If (k) is the meaning of “rich” at the deepest level, then the metaphorical and literal uses are indistinguishable -- but when or if that distinction was erased (or ever existed) depends on the process by which (k) comes to exist in our minds. (In the case of numbers, it took thousands of years for us to abstract the concept from “some 2-ish bales of hay” to “exactly 2 bales of hay” to “2” on its own, and adding the foundation of a base system (with 0) and then fitting numbers into a logical system as cardinals or ordinals... but we do seem to have, in some sense, moved towards what numbers “really are”, and we seem to discover more about them over time and with study. Analogously, perhaps (k) is the result of discovering what “rich” really is, or learning more about it...) This seems related to how cognizant speakers might be of the “pretense” they employ when using metaphor according to Walton’s theory, since the process of metaphorically extending the meaning of a word and metaphorically creating a game world may be more or less similar depending on what the definition of a word really is.

Maybe when we use the word “rich” to mean “owning a lot of valuable property” instead of (k), we are accidentally or misguidedly pretending that the game world where rich means “owning a lot of valuable property” is the real world, rather than the world in which “rich” means (k); however, maybe the reverse is true, and when we use the word “rich” to mean (k), we are employing a game world which allows us more freedom of expression than the real world meaning of “rich”.

Figuring out how we know what we know is giving us enough problems; figuring out what we know about how we know what we know seems almost like a futile task in comparison. Therefore determining whether or not we should know that we’re pretending when we pretend if the pretense theory is to be considered valid seems a little outside the scope of this paper. We certainly use metaphors (especially of the underlying, “space as time” class and maybe of the “word-internal” class, if it’s the same process) without the kind of vivid recognition of the pretense we employ to make a particularly creative or artistic metaphor. In addition, the unexpected results of “priming” tests showing that we are cognitively aware -- without

recognizing our cognitive awareness -- of relationships between words (and word parts) shows that there are different levels of awareness, of self-conscious recognition of what we know. Therefore what it would even mean to "know that we're pretending when we're pretending" is unclear. Finally, what seems to be a blurry or non-existent line between the metaphorical coining of word definitions (from "disbanded", "coining", "rich" to "recognize", "illuminate"), and our varying awareness of the metaphors involved in forging these words or in using them metaphorically (as in, "forging these words"), results in a gradation from literal to metaphorical that makes it difficult to determine what even theoretical pretending/ not-pretending would be in using these words or phrases to encode meaning or propositions.

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