



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Metaphor, Minimalism, and Semantic Generality: Seeing Things in Context

Leezenberg, M.

**DOI**

[10.1163/9789004365445\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004365445_007)

**Publication date**

2018

**Document Version**

Submitted manuscript

**Published in**

Pragmatics, Truth, and Underspecification

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Leezenberg, M. (2018). Metaphor, Minimalism, and Semantic Generality: Seeing Things in Context. In K. P. Turner, & L. Horn (Eds.), *Pragmatics, Truth, and Underspecification: Towards an Atlas of Meaning* (pp. 169-194). (Current Research in the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface; Vol. 34). Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004365445\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004365445_007)

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# *Metaphor, Minimalism, and Semantic Generality: Seeing things in Context*

Michiel Leezenberg

University of Amsterdam

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

Metaphor is alive and kicking as a topic of analytical-philosophical and linguistic inquiry. Having led a dormant existence for much of the twentieth century, it shot to prominence in the late 1970s, thanks to a number of seminal collections of papers like Ortony (1979) and Sacks (1979), and to books like Lakoff & Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Since then, it has remained an object of intense scrutiny; but this increased attention has hardly led to any convergence of opinions. Although a number of long-held and influential doctrines, e.g., the belief that metaphor is an abbreviated simile, or that it is a marginal phenomenon that purely serves poetic embellishment, have by now largely been discredited, there is no consensus concerning even basic questions of how metaphor works. Already among scholars working in analytical philosophy of language and adjacent fields, let alone cognitive approaches and continental frameworks, there is wide disagreement as to what *kind* of processes are involved in metaphorical interpretation. I come to these questions with a metaphor-related history of my own. Long ago, I developed a semantic approach to metaphor that, on the one hand, describes how metaphors systematically *depend* on their context of utterance; on the other hand, it explores how metaphors *change* their context (Leezenberg 2001). I did so by, first, extending a Kaplan-style indexical semantics to accommodate the – independently motivated – context-dependence of property expressions, captured in the so-called *thematic dimension* of the context indicating the kind of property that is being talked

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop *Radical Pragmatics 40 Years On*, Cambridge University, March 2017. I thank those present, in particular Jay Atlas, Kasia Jaszcolt, and Ruth Kempson, for their comments.

about; and second, by investigating the exact articulation of asserted, presupposed, and implied information in the utterance of a metaphor. On such an account, in a context of, say, personality properties, a metaphor like *John is a wolf* expresses the assertion that John has a particular property, say, cruelty; it presupposes the thematic dimension of personality properties.

I still believe this account to be substantially correct. Independently, and earlier, Josef Stern had developed a similar approach inspired by Kaplan's logic of demonstratives.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will contrast this account with two rival approaches that have gained prominence, or a renewed lease of life, in more recent years. First, I will discuss the thesis that metaphor involves semantic underdeterminacy rather than context-dependence, as defended by Jay David Atlas; second, I discuss the recent attempt by two advocates of so-called 'semantic minimalism' to rehabilitate Donald Davidson's controversial account, which denies metaphor all meaning or cognitive content; third, I explore whether these accounts do justice to the context-dependence of metaphor, as argued for by authors like Stern and myself, and try to provide some principled argumentation as to exactly what *kind* of context-dependence is involved in metaphor.

### *1. Atlas: two dogmas of literary modernism*

In 'Metaphor, nonspecific meaning, and utterance interpretation: Two dogmas of literary modernism', chapter 1.1. of his *Logic, Meaning, and Conversation* (2005), Jay David Atlas inveighs against two dogmas that, he claims, inform twentieth-century philosophy of language as much as studies of literary style.<sup>3</sup> The first, and most important, dogma is the belief in an essential cleavage between literal (or 'ordinary') and figurative (or 'literary') language; the second dogma is the belief that metaphors are literally false or anomalous, because they involve a 'category mistake', or a 'violation of selection restrictions,' and that it is precisely the impossibility of determining an adequate literal

---

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Stern (1985, 2000). For the canonical statement of Kaplan's logic of demonstratives, see Kaplan (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Although published only in 2005, this text was written in 1975; the original version is briefly discussed in Leezenberg (2001: 211-213); apart from a number of updated references and footnotes, there are no major divergences between the 1975 and the 2005 version.

meaning that triggers the hearer to construe an alternative, figurative interpretation. In fact, Atlas argues, this second dogma amounts to a *reduction* of metaphoricity to semantic anomaly (2005: 13). Closely related to this dogma, he adds, is the belief that such category mistakes or anomalies nevertheless have meaning (at what we would call the level of speaker's meaning), and that these meanings "may vary from person to person, are probably not recursively specifiable, and are highly sensitive to context" (2005: 12).

Many of the arguments in favor of the literal-figurative distinction, he continues, are circular, in that they presuppose some version of that distinction. The more important question, however, is whether it does any explanatory work in linguistics; on his own account, it does not (2005: 11). Thus, Atlas does not claim, with Relevance Theorists like Sperber & Wilson (1986), that metaphor and literal language differ in degree rather than kind; instead, he rejects the distinction between literal and metaphorical language altogether.<sup>4</sup> On his account, metaphors are what he calls 'semantically general' or 'semantically indeterminate' between a literal and a metaphorical reading: by themselves, they do not express any proposition and do not have determinate truth conditions. rejecting formalist or structuralist attempts to characterize metaphor in structural syntactic or semantic terms, he argues that metaphors are very much like other semantically general, but literal, sentences; hence, there is no distinction between literal and metaphorical language to be drawn at all, or put differently: there is no difference in logical type, whatever the differences in perlocutionary effect may be (2005: 15). Metaphor, Atlas concludes, is a perfectly ordinary aspect of ordinary language, which, like semantic underdeterminacy more generally, "provides us the economical alternative to vast elaborations of primitive vocabulary and conceptual distinctions" (2005: 16). On Atlas's account, modernism's main mistake lies in treating metaphor as something out of the ordinary. Human genius, he argues, lies not with the creation of poetic metaphors, but rather with the exact opposite: with the creation of a realm of 'purely

---

<sup>4</sup> An account in terms of enrichment or loosening, as has become popular in Relevance-Theoretical circles (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1986, Carston 2010, Bezuidenhout 2001), also seems too unconstrained to account for the relatively determinate content that metaphors acquire in particular contexts, but that is not yet a decisive argument against it: one might simply postulate a set of additional contextual constraints operating after the loosening that, as Relevance Theorists claim, generates a broader range of possible interpretations.

literal' use of language, especially in mathematics and physics (2005: 16).<sup>5</sup> Thus, he concludes, logical empiricism and literary modernism are guilty of the same mistake: they take the language of science as the norm rather than as the exception (2005: 16). In this context, Atlas – rightly, I believe – traces the doctrine or dogma that poetic language is emotive rather than cognitive or rational in nature to John Locke's famous – or notorious – rejection of rhetorical eloquence, and by implication, all figurative language, as designed “for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment;”<sup>6</sup> but we could elaborate on the precise character of, and motives for, this doctrine as originally found in Locke and as elaborated in later authors. Recently, Bauman & Briggs (2003: ch. 2) have argued that Locke's ‘purification’ of literal meaning was part and parcel, not just of a *philosophical* project of making ordinary language fit for epistemological purposes, but of a downright *political* project of restricting legitimate public debate to specific kinds of language (literal language that does not move passions seen as feminine) and specific classes of speakers (gentlemen, i.e., upper-class males). Likewise, the objection that the logical positivists, in their legitimate critique of metaphysics, not only threw away poetic language with the anti-metaphysical bathwater, but reduced vast areas of intuitively significant everyday language to the status of meaningless pseudopositions, has been raised before (see e.g. Levinson 1983: 227); but it has been observed less often that this criticism of metaphysics was at least in part motivated by political concerns (in particular the struggle against nationalism, antisemitism, and the continuing societal dominance of the Catholic church), and in turn implied a problematic ‘politics of language’ of its own. Such analyses open up the vast field of the political aspects of language and speech, a topic sadly neglected in analytical philosophy of language and its empirical offshoots. Atlas makes a number of further observations on metaphor in a more recent, and as of yet unpublished, book-length manuscript, *Disfiguring the Figurative: Metaphor, Irony, Speech Acts and Robert Frost's Philosophy of Language* (2017). In this text, Atlas argues, among others, that the early Frost was something of a late Wittgensteinian, in

---

<sup>5</sup> I am not sure that the language-ideological characterization of science and mathematics as domains of purely literal language would survive closer conceptual and historical scrutiny, but will not pursue this question here. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein: “there is no religious denomination in which so much sin has been committed through the misuse of metaphorical speculation as in mathematics” (1994: 3e).

<sup>6</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 3.10.34, quoted in Atlas (2005: 7).

seeing the literariness of literary texts as a public effect of public language, rather than a private mental phenomenon involving the imagination or creating a poetic state of mind (2017: 21); that Frost, a bit like Frege, replaced the word with the sentence, or as he calls it ‘the vita; sentence,’ as the basic unit of meaning (2017: 18); and that Frost defended something like a semantic generality account of metaphor that avoids both literary modernist dogmas.<sup>7</sup> He then proceeds to give novel interpretations of a number of Frost poems. Repeating his earlier claim that “metaphor is an ordinary feature of ordinary language,” and that the semantic mechanism involved in it “creates a new word with a more general, non-specific, literal [*sic*] meaning” (2017: 45); he also suggests that the (first) dogma of a fundamental literal-figurative opposition is derived from the (second) dogma that metaphors are literally false or anomalous. More importantly perhaps, he now sees his account of metaphor as part of a non-psychological characterization of literary language: “in literature, especially poetry, the sound and sense of a sentence or of a word are inseparable; in ordinary uses of language they are not” (2017: 16); as a result of this blending of sense and sound, metaphor, and poetic language more generally, cannot be paraphrased.<sup>8</sup>

Even with these later additions, however, Atlas’s argument is at best incomplete, as it gives no detailed account, or even an outline, of the actual process of metaphorical interpretation. Some of the main formal features of such an account are clear, however. First, it does not simply involve semantic ambiguity or context-dependence, implying that semantically, a metaphor does not express a determinate proposition even given a context of utterance; On this view, a metaphor in isolation expresses neither a proposition nor even a function from contexts to propositions (i.e., a character in Kaplan’s sense). Second, Atlas argues that the process of metaphorical interpretation involves a pragmatic ‘inference to the best interpretation,’ analogous to, but not identical with, Peirce’s

---

<sup>7</sup> Atlas construes Frost’s contrast between the grammatical sentence and the vital sentence as one between a grammatically well-formed string of words and the utterance of the grammatical sentence in a particular context (2017: 69); but Frost himself appears to reject the former more radically, arguing against the very idea that the sentence is a ‘grammatical cluster of words;’ the [vital] sentence, he argues, is a ‘sound in itself apart from the word sounds,’ whereas the grammatical sentence, typically written than spoken, is ‘merely accessory to the other’ (Frost 1995: 681).

<sup>8</sup> I think that this non-psychological characterization of literary language (2017: 16) and Atlas’s refusal to conflate semantic interpretation and psychological explanation point to a more radical project of de-psychologizing semantics; but I have no room to discuss these matters here

abduction or Aristotle's practical syllogisms (Atlas 2005: 68-79): it amounts to inferring the premise, and thus making explicit the deductive relationship in which it figures. The most important formal feature of such inferential patterns is that they are not deductively valid but defeasible, since they can be denied without any sense of logical contradiction. On Atlas's account, then, metaphorical interpretations are much like classical (particularized) conversational implicatures as originally characterized by Grice. They differ from Gricean implicatures as usually construed, however, in that they involve a pre-semantic pragmatic inferencing (otherwise known as 'pragmatic intrusion') that operates prior to the determination of propositional content, rather than on the basis of a semantic interpretation seen as false, anomalous, or uninformative.

Having myself both rejected the notion of literal meaning as a myth and criticized the assumption of falsehood or anomaly as a criterion for metaphor (Leezenberg 2001: 87-88; 301-304), I have considerable sympathy for Atlas's identification, and rejection, of both dogmas of literary modernism. On several points of substance, however, notably his claim that metaphor involves semantic generality rather than context-dependence (and hence is interpreted using pragmatic principles rather than semantic rules), I am not convinced. I will not enter into a discussion of these claims straight away, however, but first present another view, which has become as influential as it is controversial.

## *2. Davidson and Rorty: Dogmas of Romantic Pragmatism*

Atlas's criticisms appear to apply with full force to one of the more notorious analytical-philosophical views on metaphor: Donald Davidson's influential rejection of metaphorical meanings, and its offshoot in Richard Rorty's assimilation of metaphor to unfamiliar natural phenomena, like pulsars and platypuses. Metaphors, Davidson famously argues in 'What Metaphors Mean,' "mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (1984: 245). That is, whatever meaning metaphors express is just their literal, truth-conditional meaning; and whatever further effect they may have cannot be a meaning or cognitive content. He elaborates this claim by adding that metaphors do not express any determinate cognitive content, because they

do not state *that* things are such and such, but make us see things *as* such and such and such. A metaphor, that is, does not describe a fact or express a proposition, but conveys an insight that is visual rather than propositional, since “seeing as is not seeing that” (1984: 263).

Thus, Davidson appears to make three distinct, and not necessarily compatible, claims about metaphor: first, he argues that metaphors are not distinguished by any specifically metaphorical meaning, but by their use: “what distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use – in this, it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing” (1984: 259). This claim implies that metaphor is a distinct kind of speech act, a claim that has been challenged already by Max Black (1979). Second, however, Davidson consistently suggests that it is not speakers using metaphors but the metaphors *themselves* which produce or express such insights. Third, he suggests, but does not explicitly argue, that metaphors cause, rather than express or represent, beliefs. To see why it is impossible to hold all three of these claims simultaneously, let us look at each of them in more detail. First, Davidson’s repeated claims that “metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use” (e.g., p. 247, 259) suggest that whatever effect a metaphor has is achieved by speakers rather than sentences, and would lead one to expect a pragmatic account of metaphor in terms of speaker’s intentions and speaker’s meanings, for example, along the lines developed by Grice. Throughout his article, however, Davidson is keen to talk not of the *speaker* using a metaphor, but the metaphor *itself*, as ‘making us attend to some likeness’ (p. 247), as ‘nudging us into noting’ likenesses (p. 253), etc. This suggests, against Davidson’s first claim, that metaphors do have a semantic effect after all, in that here, it is the sentence rather than the utterance of that sentence by a speaker, which does this or that thing with the hearer. Yet, Davidson’s phrasing seems no coincidence or slip of the pen: by analyzing the effect of a metaphor as resulting from a speaker to intending to communicate something, he would relapse into characterizing this effect as a speaker’s meaning or utterance occasion meaning (or what Grice would call ‘non-natural meaning’), and thus as a propositional content after all.

Finally, Davidson consistently suggests that metaphors (or, again, speakers using metaphors) *cause* rather than represent or justify particular beliefs or insights: metaphors, he writes, ‘provoke’ or ‘invite’ thoughts (p. 261); they ‘make us notice aspects’ (p. 261);



they ‘make us see one thing as another’ (p. 263), and finally, “metaphor can, like a picture or a bump n the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact” (p. 262). Thus, he clearly implies that metaphor is a cause rather than an expression or representation of a cognitive content, a beliefs, or a thought; but oddly, he stops short of saying so explicitly. Only on p. 263 does he explicitly state “what we are *caused* to notice is generally not propositional in character” [emph. added]. Here, the use of the impersonal passive leaves implicit whether it is the metaphor or the speaker doing the causing.

The reason for Davidson’s silence and ambivalence is presumably his hesitance to draw the the all-too-radical, and highly implausible, conclusion that metaphor falls outside the realm of communication altogether. This is, however, exactly the conclusion drawn by Richard Rorty: he explicitly claims that metaphors are causes rather than representations of beliefs, and as such fall outside the realm of rational and intentional communication:

Davidson lets us see metaphors on the model of unfamiliar events in the natural world – *causes* of changing beliefs and desires – rather than on the model of *representations* of unfamiliar worlds. (1987: 284; emph. in original).

Put differently, live metaphors play no role in justifying beliefs (p. 293), and do not communicate a non-natural meaning (p. 294); it is only when a metaphor dies, Rorty continues, that it crosses the ‘fuzzy and fluctuating line’ between natural and non-natural meaning, and starts to convey information, that is, to act as a justification of beliefs (295). In illustration of this claim, Rorty likens metaphor to birdsong: it may be a stimulus or cause to knowledge, he writes; but in itself, it falls outside the rational practice of giving and asking for reasons.

I am not sure whether Rorty does full justice to Davidson’s ambiguous position here, nor do I know whether he is correct in assuming that metaphor-using poets and chirping birds do not engage in intentional communication;<sup>9</sup> but his view of poets as resembling

---

<sup>9</sup> On this moot question, cf. the highly instructive discussion between two characters in Gerard Reve’s novel, *Het Boek van Violet en Dood* (ch. VIII), about the question of whether birds sing in order to praise their creator, or instead produce melodies in order to delimit their territory and invite other birds to sexual intercourse.

chirping birds rather than talking humans rests on an extremely narrow construal of what qualifies as ‘rational’ communication,- and, by extension, of what qualifies as ‘human’ – that is, intentional - action. However, I will not address these philosophical-anthropological questions, but only note that both Rorty’s and Davidson’s accounts imply that metaphors as such have no place in the inferential practice of giving and asking for reasons, i.e., that they are never and cannot be used as such in arguments, - a claim that is, in principle, testable. The crucial question to be explored then becomes whether or not one can argue about metaphors or by using metaphors; or, to put it differently, whether we can ever use metaphors in practices of giving and asking for reasons. I will return to this question below; for now, the main point is that this radical doctrine is clearly driven by pragmatist philosophical considerations rather than by any detailed study of how metaphors actually function in linguistic communication. For Rorty, metaphors are on a par with anomalous natural phenomena: the Davidsonian view, he argues, “takes them out of the sphere of what Grice calls ‘non-natural meaning’ and reduces them to the level of mere stimuli” (1987: 291). Suspicions against thus treating metaphor, he continues, rest on the mistaken – and Kantian – presumption that there is an inviolable, ‘metaphysical ‘ break between the natural and the non-natural, or between scheme and content. Thus, Rorty’s – and, if we are to believe him, also Davidson’s – account of metaphor tunes in with, or is driven by, the pragmatist rejection of what Davidson (1984: 189-190) calls the ‘third dogma of empiricism,’ and what Sellars (1997 [1956]) calls the ‘myth of the given:’ the belief in a radical break between what is given to the mind and what is added by the mind, between conceptual scheme and content, or between language and experience. On Rorty’s account, this break is not metaphysical, but merely “the temporary and pragmatic break between stimuli whose occurrences are more or less predictable [...] and stimuli which are not” (1987: 292). Elsewhere, he even describes this break as *cultural* rather than metaphysical: both scientists and poets, he believes, fall outside all language games, in that they are primarily engaged in presenting new metaphors, rather than developing better or more adequate descriptions of an antecedently given reality.<sup>10</sup> One would not be exaggerating, I think, in calling this position romantic; the romanticism implicit in Rorty’s pragmatism becomes especially

---

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Rorty (1989: 8).

clear in his conclusion that asking ‘how metaphor works’ is as pointless as asking how genius works: if we could explain them, he writes, they would become superfluous, and “matters of amusement [...] rather than indispensable instruments of moral and intellectual progress” (1987: 296).

Temporary and pragmatic the break between causes and reasons, or stimuli and representations, may be, as Rorty claims; nonetheless, on his account, it is essential, and indeed unbridgeable at any one moment. If it were not, Rorty’s entire argument, which is predicated on precisely this distinction both here and in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, would collapse. For example, it is the irreducible difference between the space of reasons and the space of causes that allows Rorty to reject Quine’s proposal to reduce epistemology to developmental psychology (1979: ch. V). Hence, I would not call this distinction ‘metaphysical’, but rather epistemological or logical: after all, it is logically impossible, we have been told since Hume, to reduce normative states to purely causal or descriptive ones; thus, trying to reduce epistemic states of knowledge (which involve normative notions like truth, correctness, and validity), to purely causal terms involves a logical mistake, on a par, Sellars famously argues, ‘with the naturalist fallacy in ethics’ (1997: §5).

Thus, Davidson’s and Rorty’s views on metaphor are crucially shaped not only by the Quinean rejection of reductionism and the analytic-synthetic distinction, but also by the Sellarsian rejection of the distinction between scheme and content. From Quine, both inherit the rejection of reified meanings; from Sellars, they inherit the rejection of conceptual schemes as distinct from neutral contents, and the concomitant attempt to separate the notions of truth and meaning (cf. Rorty 1979: 301). Despite this explicit disavowal of the three empiricist dogmas, however, Davidson and Rorty clearly maintain the two modernist dogmas identified by Atlas. Thus, Davidson clearly believes that there is a strict distinction between literal and figurative: he claims that, even if the boundaries between literal and metaphorical uses of words cannot be drawn clearly, as others have plausibly argued, “this fuzziness [...] cannot erase the line between what a sentence means (given its context) and what it ‘draws our attention to’” (p. 260). He also adheres to Atlas’s second dogma, witness his remark that a sentence, even if it *is* not actually false, must be *taken* to be false for the hearer to “accept it as a metaphor and to hunt out

the hidden implication” (p. 257-258). Much the same can be said of Rorty, who sees the distinction between literal and figurative as irreducible, witness his remark that “it is essential to Davidson’s view that dead metaphors are not metaphors” (p. 292n); his belief that metaphors are anomalous sentences is betrayed by his claim that they are like anomalous natural phenomena (p. 290).

Rorty’s claim that metaphors are causes rather than representations of beliefs is thus a pragmatist restatement of the dogma that there is an essential difference between literal and figurative language. Perhaps, then, we may also think of the distinction between normative reasons and naturalist causes as another dogma – not of empiricism, as there seems to be nothing specifically empiricist about it, but rather of romantic pragmatism. This is not necessarily to say, of course, that there simply is *no* distinction between causes and reasons, or between facts and norms, or that naturalist fallacies as attacked by Hume, Moore and Sellars are not fallacies after all; it is merely to say that the spatial imagery of the ‘space of causes’ and the ‘space of reasons’ may obscure as much as it highlights. More specifically, this imagery downplays the irreducible temporality of linguistic practices and the historical variability of norms and normativity, and thus overlooks the fact that this distinction may be more radically contingent and historically variable than Sellars, Rorty, and others allow for.

Whatever its philosophical motivation, the doctrine that metaphor does not involve metaphorical meanings runs into serious difficulties, and has met with substantial criticisms. In fact, in a later paper, ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’ (2005 [1986]), Davidson appears to withdraw or contradict virtually every substantial claim he had made on metaphor. Although this paper strictly speaking concerns malapropisms or ‘slips of the tongue’ rather than metaphors, its implications for his earlier views are obvious.<sup>11</sup> The existence of such malapropisms, Davidson argues, like saying ‘epitaphs’ when talking about epithets, proves that speakers do not need shared sets of rules or conventions for being able to communicate. Instead, they communicate what he calls ‘first meanings’ rather than conventional meanings. These first meanings are what the speaker communicates on a particular occasion rather than what his words mean as a

---

<sup>11</sup> For criticism of Davidson’s earlier views, see e.g. Black 1979; Stern 1991. For more detailed discussion of the relation between Davidson (1984) and (2005), see Leezenberg (2001), esp. pp. 124-134; cf. Camp 2013.

matter of convention, and thus come close to what Grice and others would call ‘utterance (or utterer’s) occasion meaning.’ Thus, Davidson, famously concludes, the existence of malapropisms proves that ‘there is no such thing as a language’ (2005: 107); that is, successful communication does not require shared conventions.

Rorty, however, construes this rejection of shared rules as a more radical rejection of language *tout court* as an intermediate between our beliefs and the world: “[Davidson] would like us to stop thinking that there is something called ‘language’ which is a ‘scheme’ which can organize, or fit, or stand in some other noncausal relation to, a ‘content’ called ‘the world’” (1991: 60). Thus, by leaving out just the one letter *a*, he radically transforms Davidson’s assertion: on this reading, it amounts to the rejection not of shared languages in favor of idiolects or of shared conventions in explaining communication, but of the distinction between the world as given and language as a conceptual scheme to organize that world. True, Davidson on occasion appears to make statements similar to Rorty’s, witness his comment that “we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” (2005: 107); but his point in this particular paper is that we cannot, and need not, explain communication in terms of shared rules or conventions, reproducing a point about meaning made earlier by Grice (1957).

Davidson appears to believe that a speaker using a metaphor also communicates a first meaning, witness his admission that that in ‘What Metaphors Mean,’ he was “foolishly stubborn about the word meaning when all I cared about was the primacy of first meaning” (2005: 173n). This comment, however, masks a far more radical shift: what he calls ‘first meaning’ here is not, as he suggests, word meaning, that is, literal or conventional meaning, but rather speaker’s meaning or meaning<sub>nn</sub>, which is determined by intentions rather than conventions. The belief expressed here, that literal meanings are speaker’s meanings (or, more precisely, utterer’s occasion meanings) is, of course, a far cry from the received view, which is also Davidson’s earlier view, that literal meanings are conventional word or sentence meanings. Further, in (2005), Davidson describes successful malapropisms as *accepted* or *agreed on* deviations from ordinary usages, and hence as what he calls ‘first meanings;’ but this implies that a metaphor that is accepted

or appreciated by its audience may likewise qualify as a first meaning; that is, that as a metaphor, it communicates a meaning or cognitive content.

As an account of communication that does away with the need for shared rules or conventions, Davidson's argument fails miserably. Malapropisms are not 'sheer invention' as he believes (2005: 141); rather, they clearly depend on, and exploit, the conventional phonetic resources of a language (thus, for example, replacing 'epithet' by the similar-sounding 'epitaph'), as much as metaphors exploit its semantic resources. It also implies, against Davidson's earlier argument, that metaphors, or speakers using metaphors, may communicate (first) meanings after all. In short, the later Davidson appears to withdraw much of what he had earlier said about metaphor; but these changes are not necessarily improvements.

### *3. A Dogma of Semantic Minimalism?*

We thus have three competing, and incompatible, accounts of metaphor: the Davidsonian account that denies metaphor any meaning; the semantic-generalist view that treats metaphorical interpretation as involving a pre-semantic inference to the best interpretation; and an account in terms of context-dependence, as developed by Stern 2000 and Leezenberg 2001.<sup>12</sup> In the following, I would like to tease out the philosophical assumptions of these positions: minimalists, with Davidson, will probably – though, as we shall see, not necessarily – reject the idea of metaphor as having contextually varying truth conditions; semantic generalists see contextual variation in metaphor as pragmatically driven rather than semantically and compositionally generated; and literalists explain such variation in compositional semantic terms.

First, let us explore minimalism and its Davidsonian roots. First, semantic minimalists tend to reject the postulation of various kinds of hidden context-dependence in everyday language as an explanatory strategy in semantics and pragmatics. Apart from a relatively small set of lexical items like *I*, *this*, *here*, *now*, etc., they argue, context plays little if any

---

<sup>12</sup> This distinction virtually coincides with what in the literature have come to be called, respectively, semantic minimalism, contextualism, and literalism (cf. e.g. Stern 2009); but I find this terminology needlessly confusing.

role in interpretation. Rather, they continue, whatever context-dependence we do encounter is overtly grammatically encoded; and every sentence expresses a (basically context-free) ‘minimal semantic content,’ which is shared by all utterances of that sentence.<sup>13</sup>

Semantic minimalism is clearly, if not very emphatically, inspired by Davidson’s truth-conditional theory of interpretation, which aims at keeping the semantics simple by employing an extensional first-order predicate logic. This may make it tempting for minimalists to take recourse to Davidson’s account of metaphor as well; but is that strategy really forced upon them? Put differently: is it *essential* to semantic minimalism that metaphor not only does not involve any hidden or overt context-dependence, but also falls outside the realm of meaning altogether? Josef Stern (2009) clearly thinks it is not. He argues that metaphor in fact passes two tests proposed by Cappelen & Lepore for determining whether a given expression is semantically context-dependent, viz., the ‘inter-contextual disquotational indirect report’ test and the ‘blocking of collective descriptions’ test.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this, he then argues that an account of metaphor as involving semantic context-dependence (which he, as noted, calls ‘literalist’) is in fact compatible with semantic minimalism, and that minimalists “can agree that the only semantic content of a metaphor is its metaphorical interpretation, without conceding that claim for every non-literal interpretation” (2009: 284). This would, of course, require minimalists like Cappelen & Lepore to agree that metaphor involves a kind of non-overt context-dependence similar to that found in indexicals, which – given their general dislike of the appeal to context-dependence as an explanatory strategy – seems unlikely. Thus, a Davidsonian account of metaphor may not be *necessitated* by semantic minimalism; but it certainly fits in well with it. This need not cause any surprise, of course, given the latter’s roots in Davidson’s truth-theoretical theory of meaning. A Davidsonian inspiration is also quite visible in Lepore & Stone’s (2010) minimalist account of metaphor. Metaphor, they claim, does not have any specifically metaphorical meaning or discourse effect; or, as they put it, it does not add anything to the

---

<sup>13</sup> In line with this general attitude, Cappelen & Dever (2013) argue that context-dependence is rather less widespread and rather less philosophically interesting than has been thought in the wake of Kaplan’s seminal writings.

<sup>14</sup> Stern (2009); cf. Camp (2007).

‘conversational scoreboard’ (cf. Lewis 1979). Unlike Rorty, however, they *do* see metaphor as belonging to the realm of intentional communication, but not as communicating anything in virtue of the hearer recognizing the speaker’s intention, as Grice claims is the case with non-natural meaning.

This leads to puzzling results: Lepore & Stone’s attempt to preserve a Davidsonian-style account of metaphor as not involving meaning or cognitive content, while at the same time maintaining that it should be treated within a theory of action formulated in Gricean terms of intention recognition, is as baffling as Davidson’s about-face concerning metaphorical meaning. A bit like Davidson’s first meanings, the results of such communication closely resemble what Grice would call ‘non-natural meaning or ‘meaning<sub>nn</sub>,’ but Lepore & Stone are adamant that they not be called ‘meanings’. Although a speaker using a metaphor may intend to draw a hearer’s attention to similarities, this is not, they claim, an intention to convey a propositional content *p*, i.e., he does not “elicit an effect given by *p* in his audience by means of recognizing the speaker’s intention to elicit this effect” (2010: 170). Unlike or against Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1987), they unequivocally argue that a speaker uttering a metaphor is engaged in intentional communication, or, as they call it, ‘cooperative interaction;’ but like them, they reject the idea that she is communicating a meaning, i.e., a content that “must be identified either with what a speaker intends her audience to recognize as trying to communicate; or as what must be added to the conversational record in consequence of coordination between her and her audience” (2010: 170). Metaphors, they argue, are like jokes or hints: the goal of their being uttered is for appreciation to occur rather than for information to be exchanged by the recognition of intentions (2010: 171).

This argument puts far too strong a priori constraints on what one can and cannot do with metaphors; one can, of course, intend to do all kinds of things in using a metaphor, whether to ‘put things before our eyes’, to invite or to suggest, to praise or to insult, to appeal to the audience’s expectations or to play on its emotions. There seems to be no good reason why all, and only, metaphors should involve the particular intention to non-propositionally suggest likenesses. In claiming, with Lepore & Stone, that they do, one not only risks reducing them to particular kinds of speech acts, but also reproducing the dogmatic belief in a strict and radical distinction between literal and metaphorical



language. It is one thing to argue that the effects of metaphor *need* not be (exclusively) propositional in nature; few would dispute that metaphors can help us visualize things in unexpected or vivid ways, or, to speak with Aristotle, ‘to put things before our eyes’ (*pros ommatôn poiein*, *Rhet.* 1411b6ff.). It is another thing altogether to claim that these effects *cannot* be propositional.

Both in Davidson and in Lepore & Stone, this more radical claim appears to be motivated less by an analysis of the actual behavior of metaphors in their wider settings than by a priori considerations about what a theory of meaning should look like, and in particular by the desire for a restricted semantic theory that minimizes appeals to context-dependence and does away with intensional notions. This desire becomes visible in their claim that progress in the realm of meaning “depends on developing and applying clear standards that demarcate semantic phenomena narrowly. If we can locate metaphor elsewhere, it is good news for meaning” (2010: 179). This drive to keep semantics simple and clearly delimited may sound appealing enough; but in this paper at least, Lepore and Stone do not develop any clear standards of demarcation to decide whether or not metaphor should be treated as a semantic phenomenon; rather, their treatment is driven by general philosophical considerations. Particularly revealing in this context is their comment that “our intuitions about literal meaning place heavy constraints on key semantic notions: truth, reference, context” (*ibid.*).

This suggests that Lepore & Stone are as much beholden to a dogmatic concept of literal meaning as Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1987). It also suggests that, with respect to metaphor at least, the notion of a ‘minimal proposition,’ too, may reproduce a problematic – if not dogmatic – notion of literal meaning rather than providing a novel explanatory account.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Stern (2009) argues that the minimal proposition expressed by a metaphor is in fact its metaphorical interpretation; but on his view, metaphor crucially involves a covert context-dependence of the kind rejected by Cappelen & Lepore, in particular through the operator *Mthat*, which he sees as present in deep structure or logical form, but generally not overtly realized.

*4. Dogmas Aside*

Despite the obvious differences between Davidson's and Atlas's accounts of metaphor, there are some intriguing convergences between semantic minimalism and semantic generalism. In his discussion of semantic minimalism, Atlas (2007) claims that, unlike Cappelen & Lepore, he is not a 'propositionalist' about literal meaning, let alone a 'minimal propositionalist;' but like them, he rejects the postulating of widespread ambiguity or context-dependence in natural language as an explanatory strategy. Every sentence type, he elaborates, has a literal (sic) meaning; but not all sentences necessarily express propositions that can be evaluated truth-conditionally. Thus, Atlas identifies a large class of sentences (or sentence types, to be precise) that have a literal (or, more precisely, semantically indeterminate or semantically general) meaning, but neither express a determinate proposition nor have any determinate truth conditions in isolation from a particular context of utterance. This context-dependence, however, is qualitatively different both from semantic ambiguity and from indexicality, in that it is guided by pragmatic principles for inferring speaker's intentions rather than semantic rules.

There are several recent accounts of metaphor that resemble Atlas's, most importantly in claiming that metaphor involves Gricean inferencing even if it does not rest on a defective or anomalous literal meaning. Thus, the 'direct expression view' proposed by Bezuidenhout (2001) rejects the view of metaphor as a case of classical (particularized) conversational implicature triggered by an apparently inappropriate, uninformative, or trivial literal interpretation; but the interpretive mechanism she suggests is clearly of a Gricean character, as it involves a defeasible process of inferring or 'calculating' the speaker's intentions on the basis of assumptions – held to be universal – about the speaker's rationality. Likewise, Recanati's self-proclaimed 'quasi-contextualist' position resembles Atlas's in its rejection of the notion of a minimal proposition as 'theoretically useless' (2004: 86), and in its conviction that large areas of language interpretation, including metaphor, involve pragmatic principles rather than semantic rules. On Recanati's account, semantic interpretation only yields a 'semantic schema' or a

‘propositional radical’ rather than a full-blown proposition.<sup>16</sup> In his conclusion that most context-dependent expressions are ‘semantically indeterminate rather than indexical in the strict sense’ (2001: 85), Recanati comes close to Atlas’s position that metaphors are semantically underdeterminate and that their interpretation involves a defeasible inference to the best interpretation. Given the open-ended and indeterminate quality often ascribed to metaphorical interpretation, it certainly seems tempting – not to say obvious – to conclude that metaphor involves what Recanati calls “a more radical form of [pragmatic] context-dependence” based on the indeterminate and defeasible calculation of speaker’s intentions rather than the ‘very straightforward,’ i.e., rule-governed and deductive, semantic context-dependence typical of indexicals like *I* or *here* (2001: 85). Tempting as this conclusion is, however, it should be put to the test: one would like to see whether we can actually *prove*, rather than merely claim, that metaphorical interpretations involve Gricean inferencing rather than semantic-context-dependence. Recanati argues that from a psychological point of view, it is impossible to separate purely semantic interpretation based on rules and a more pragmatic, optional process of enrichment or loosening representations; both, he suggests, are “indissociable, mutually dependent aspects of a single process of pragmatic interpretation” (2001: 88). If we follow this argument to its logical conclusion, we may well end up with the claim that literal meaning, or sentence meaning, is an illusion; but Recanati appears to stop short of this claim. Thus, despite their similarities, Bezuidenhout and Recanati are not quite as bold as Atlas in rejecting the notion of literal meaning as an unfounded dogma. But dogmas aside, how can we adjudicate between the minimalist approach, the semantic generality view, and a ‘literalist’, or, as I would prefer to call it, a direct contextual interpretation account of metaphor? It would be nice to have a diagnostic for determining whether metaphor involves no meaning at all, pragmatic intrusion, or semantic, rule-based context-dependence. Now, in fact there *is* such a diagnostic for distinguishing entailment, presupposition, and implicature: they display rather different inferential behavior. For example, unlike entailments, implicatures are cancelable; unlike both

---

<sup>16</sup> Recanati identifies this propositional radical with what Russell called a ‘propositional function’; but this may be misleading, as one might construe this with what authors like Dana Scott call propositional functions, i.e., functions from contexts to propositions, or what Kaplan (1989) called ‘characters’, which is precisely *not* what Recanati intends.

implicature and entailment, presupposition is preserved under negation and modals, and so on. I am not sure we can come up with a similar diagnostic for metaphor as such; but by exploring whether its interpretation displays the inferential properties of semantic entailment, implicature, or presupposition, we may be able to test these positions at least indirectly.<sup>17</sup>

Let us begin with the Davidsonian/Rortyan claim that metaphor falls outside rational communication. A different way of putting this is that there can be *no* inferential relations involving metaphorically interpreted sentences; instead, only the literal meaning may show relations of entailment, contradiction and the like; but since this generally (though not necessarily) involves a falsehood, obviously, anything will follow from it. More generally, this claim implies that metaphors as such do not establish discourse relations with the sentences or utterances surrounding them, for example, by setting up referents for anaphoric pronouns, by expressing temporal or causal relations between different sentences or phrases, etc.; or that metaphors make no contribution to the conversational scoreboard.<sup>18</sup> Now this is, in principle, a testable claim: if we can establish that there are metaphors that show logical, or inferential, relations of e.g., entailment or contradiction with other sentences, or if succeeding anaphorical pronouns do pick up referents established by metaphorically interpreted noun phrases, it may be considered refuted.<sup>19</sup> Here, the odds seem heavily against Davidsonian accounts: it seems perfectly possible to reason or argue with, and about, metaphors, as in

(1) John is not a wolf but a weasel

*Prima facie*, one would think that one metaphorically expressed property, say, cruelty, is denied and another (say, cowardice) is affirmed of John. That is, the negation does not cancel or undo the metaphorical interpretation altogether, but merely rejects one specific

---

<sup>17</sup> I have discussed the diagnostics for conversational implicature and their applicability to metaphor in Leezenberg (2001: 102-108).

<sup>18</sup> Lepore & Stone (2010), following Brandom (1994) and Lewis (1979). It should be noted, incidentally, that Brandom's influential formulation of an inferentialist semantics has little to say about the inferential particularities of conversational implicature, and nothing at all about the place of metaphor and other figures of speech in communication.

<sup>19</sup> This aspect of a Davidsonian account has been noticed, and criticized, before: see e.g. Bergmann 1982, Bezuidenhout 2001, Leezenberg (2001: 233-238).

metaphorically expressed property in favor of another. To judge from such examples, metaphors can indeed be part of a practice of asserting and denying, and thus of giving and asking for reasons; here, the burden of proof would seem to lie with those who claim otherwise.

Metaphors also appear able to set up discourse referents, and thus to make contributions to the conversational scoreboard after all. When John Maynard Keynes wrote about Wittgenstein's arrival in Cambridge:

(2) Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5.00PM train

He clearly intended his metaphorically used *God* in referring to Wittgenstein, among others, to establish an antecedent for the anaphoric pronoun *him* in the following sentence. In other words, whatever other effects (2) may have, it does make a contribution to the conversational scoreboard; otherwise the referent of *him* would remain a mystery, to be solved by other means.

Another case that seems difficult if not impossible to account for in Davidsonian terms is presented by metaphors involving *if-then* clauses:

(3) If art is the tip of the iceberg, then I'm the part that's sinking below (Lou Reed)

Here, again, the metaphorical antecedent phrase would seem to set up a set of discourse referents to be picked up in the consequent. Both examples suggest that metaphors, as metaphors, *do* establish discourse relations with the clauses, phrases, sentences and/or utterances surrounding them. When seen in their wider linguistic contexts, that is, metaphors appear to express contents after all. In fact, whatever plausibility Davidson's view has results in part from his limiting his attention to decontextualized sentences of the simple *A is a B* type; it progressively decreases if we look at the behavior of actual metaphors in their wider linguistic setting and nonlinguistic contexts.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that the discourse effects of metaphor remain a relatively underexplored topic.

All of the above seems to militate, rather decisively, against approaches that deny metaphors all cognitive content, inferential role, or place in intentional communication. Next, *if* one accepts that metaphors may maintain inferential or discourse relations with their linguistic environment, one would like to know whether those relations primarily involve semantic or pragmatic principles. The fact that metaphor can be used in *any* kind of reasoning or inferential process, whether or not defeasible, militates against Davidson's and Rorty's view; but by exploring exactly *which* kind of inferential processes are involved, we can perhaps make a reasoned decision, as opposed to a possibly dogmatic claim, as to whether metaphor involves semantic generality or indeterminacy, or rather some kind of context-dependence. We can pose this question in testable terms by asking whether metaphorical interpretations have the inferential properties of conversational implicatures, rather than those of asserted or presupposed semantic information. Defeasibility is one relatively familiar diagnostic to establish whether a particular inference is semantic or pragmatic in character. Grice argues that, unlike deductively valid semantic entailments, conversational implicatures are defeasible in that they can be denied without a sense of logical contradiction (1989: 39). The question then becomes whether metaphorical interpretations are defeasible in anything like this sense. If a metaphorical interpretation is indeed a Gricean inference or something like it, it must be cancellable; that is, the metaphorical content can be denied without any sense of logical contradiction. But when Dutch novelist W.F. Hermans denied his own earlier characterization of his former publisher, Geert van Oorschot, as a 'vulture' (*aasgier*) for allegedly cheating him out of part of his royalties, he clearly did not exactly *cancel* his metaphor:

- (4) Van Oorschot is geen aasgier. Aasgieren zijn tenslotte hoogvliegers.  
Van Oorschot is not a vulture. After all, vultures are high-flyers.

Here, he did not cancel the metaphorical interpretation altogether, but merely *one way* of construing or explicating it: obviously, his sarcastic elaboration does not amount to a denial of his earlier metaphorical claim that his publisher is a scavenger, picks the bones of his victims, etc. Defenders of a pragmatic inference view have claimed that what is

defeated or canceled in metaphorical denials like (4), a particular metaphorical interpretation can in fact be cancelled in favor of another metaphorical interpretation (cf., e.g., Bezuidenhout 2001: 183); but such claims appear to rest on an erroneous, or at least tendentious, reading of Grice's original characterization of defeasibility: on Grice's own account, implicatures can be canceled *simpliciter*, not merely canceled in favor of some other implicature.

Another diagnostic that seems of particular relevance to metaphor is the claimed universal character of principles of rational action, as contrasted with language-or culture-specific semantic rules. Semantic interpretation, it has been argued, involves a knowledge of language-specific rules or conventions; pragmatic inferencing, by contrast, involves not language-or culture specific conventions, but universal principles of human action (Levinson 1983: 120-121; cf. Recanati 2001a: 82). On such an account, the same metaphors would lead to similar – if defeasible – inferences about the speaker's intentions in different languages, based on the assumption that the latter is behaving rationally. Again, treating metaphor as involving a universal inferencing of this kind rather than a more convention-based form of interpretation would lead to the rather implausible suggestion that metaphorical interpretations are determined largely independently from linguistic or cultural inventions. But, for example, a term like *sweet*, as used in

(5) John's words are sweet

may receive rather different metaphorical interpretations in English, where it means or communicates that John's words are pleasant; but in Chinese, *sweet* would mean that his words are specious.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in English, 6.a.

(6.a.) John is a fox

(6.b.) John-wa kitsune desu

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Stern (1985: 685), Leezenberg (2001: 216).

communicates that John is sly and cunning; but its Japanese translation (6.b.) conveys that John is a malicious spirit; in fact, the latter may well be taken as literally stating that John is a fox spirit by many a Japanese speaker.

Thus, against a semantic-generality account, there seem to be good reasons not to see metaphor as involving a Gricean kind of inferencing; but exactly what kind of inferential process *is* involved? The fact, indicated by examples (1) and (4) above, that metaphorical interpretations survive negation suggests that they share a number of relevant structural features with presupposition rather than implicature. Hence, it now remains to get clearer about exactly what these features are, and thus to explicate exactly what is presupposed and what is asserted in the utterance of a metaphor. Much like presuppositions, metaphorical interpretations appear to survive negation, modals, and embedding in *if-then* clauses:

(7.a.) John is a wolf

(7.b.) John is not a wolf

(7.c.) Perhaps John is a wolf

(7.d.) If John is a wolf, we'd better keep an eye on him.

This suggests that at least part of what is communicated in metaphor is presupposed information; and this presupposed part is what I call the thematic dimension, that is, the kind of property involved (say, biological taxonomic properties as opposed to moral personality properties). The existence of thematic dimensions as contextual factors should not be in doubt: it is independently motivated by the distinct inferential behavior of so-called predicate-limiting adverbials (Leezenberg 2001: 168ff.; cf. Bartsch 1987) like *healthwise* or *financially*:

(8) Healthwise/Financially, John is doing well

The adverbial explicates the thematic dimension here, leading to two different properties being ascribed to John in each case: respectively, being healthy, and being wealthy.



Further, it has been argued on independent grounds that thematic dimensions involve presupposed rather than asserted information, and that presuppositions survive exactly the kind of embedding shown in 7.a.-d.<sup>22</sup> One cannot conclude from this, however, that the property metaphorical ascribed to John in (7.a.) comes from a set of ‘presupposed properties’ as Stern (1985, 2000) would have it.<sup>23</sup> Rather, upon further exploration, it emerges that metaphor crucially involves the so-called ‘thematic dimension,’ i.e., the *kind* of properties talked about, as the relevant contextual variable. In a thematic dimension of taxonomic properties, (7.a.) is simply literally false; but in a dimension of personality properties, it is true if John is cruel, lonely in old age, etc., and false if, for example, he is cowardly rather than cruel.

On such an account, which one may label one of direct contextual interpretation, metaphor involves the interpretation of a predicate in a novel or unexpected thematic dimension. This account, moreover, suggests that what is presupposed in metaphor is the thematic dimension (e.g., that of personality properties in (7.a.-d.)), and what is asserted is that John has the property of cruel, lonely, etc., *given* that dimension. Such an account goes a long way in explaining the actual inferential behavior of metaphors, including its embedding under negation, modals, and so on.

Thus, the case for metaphor as not involving meanings, contents or contributions to the conversational record appears to collapse when we explore the effects of specific metaphors in their wider discursive context; likewise, the case for metaphor as an example of semantic underdeterminacy or generality, and as involving pragmatic intrusion, that is, pre-semantic Gricean inferencing, appears at best unproven and at worst implausible. Rather, the inferential evidence discussed above would seem to suggest that metaphor involves a particular – and independently motivated – kind of context-dependence of property expressions, and a particular articulation of presupposed and asserted information.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Bartsch (1987: 5); Levinson (1983: 177-199).

<sup>23</sup> Stern’s view of presuppositions in terms of sets of properties rather than propositions does not clearly distinguish between what is asserted and what is presupposed in a metaphor, leaving him unable to account for negation and the kinds of embedding noted in 7.a-d; cf. Leezenberg (2001: 202-208).

*Conclusion: Just One More Dogma*

Metaphor, in short, appears to involve semantic context-dependence rather than pragmatic inferencing or entirely non-linguistic (cognitive) processes. Against semantic minimalists, one may reply that metaphors do express specifically metaphorical propositions or contents, and involve a kind of context-dependence, the reality of which can be established on independent grounds; the onus of proof would seem to lie with those who deny, against all appearances, that metaphors make any contribution to the conversational scoreboard. Against semantic generalists, one may argue that metaphors appear to involve context-dependence rather than semantic generality, and hence are interpreted by resorting to semantic rules rather than pragmatic principles. There may be no way of telling directly whether a metaphor in isolation does or does not express a proposition; but one may give some reasonably plausible indirect arguments. Most importantly, the inferential behavior of metaphors appears not to conform to the patterns predicted or demanded either by a semantic-generality account that denies them any determinate propositional content at sentence level and relies on Gricean inferencing, or by a semantic-minimalism account that denies metaphor meaning altogether. This inferential behavior provides suggestive, if partly indirect, evidence that, *pace* Davidson, metaphors can be used to make assertions, or more generally, contributions to the conversational scoreboard; and, *pace* Atlas, that metaphor involves a semantic form of context-dependence rather than a pragmatic – and defeasible – inference to the best interpretation.

Davidson's and Rorty's accounts of metaphor presuppose both dogmas of literary modernism; as such, they not only rest on a very restrictive notion of literal meaning, but also presuppose an extremely narrow construal of what constitutes rational communication. Davidsonians, and a good many others who see communication as, first and foremost, a practice of giving and asking for reasons, give an unwarranted priority to assertive language and the exchange of information; Griceans, construing rational linguistic behavior as cooperative, take a culturally and historically very specific ideal of polite conversation over tea as a universal notion of rationality. Both positions, then, appear to rest on folk-theoretical assumptions about rationality, cooperativeness, and

speakers' agency and intentions, that have too unthinkingly, and for far too long, been taken for granted as primitive, self-evident, and universal explanatory notions. One may ask if the (ultimately Kantian) concept of rationality underlying the pragmatic-inference approach to metaphor is in the end not as narrow and ethnocentric as the Davidsonian (and ultimately Lockean) notion of literal language. If it is, we may well have isolated another dogma that has strongly – if largely silently – dominated the analytical philosophy of language. My argument here is not so much that metaphor, or poetic language in general, is more 'rational' than authors from Locke to Rorty would have it; rather, it is that the linguistic forms and practices considered 'rational' and 'literal' in analytic philosophy, and in semantics and pragmatics, rest on a prior exclusion of other kinds and usages of language, which reduces such uses and functions to a secondary, marginal, or even illegitimate status.

The literary modernist beliefs in literal meaning and in the semantic anomaly of metaphors really are dogmas, that is, tacit and tenacious assumptions held to be true as a matter of course rather than explicit doctrines put up for challenges in a rational debate. Likewise, the third dogma discussed above, i.e., the pragmatist belief in a strict break between the factual and the normative, or between causes and reasons, is generally assumed rather than argued for. We may now have uncovered a final dogma of philosophical pragmatics: the – ultimately Kantian – belief that linguistic communication normally involves the rational and cooperative action of fully conscious and intentionally acting (that is, autonomous) actors. This initially plausible picture, however, is in fact a highly culturally specific one (cf. Leezenberg 2010). Put differently, to speak with Wittgenstein, these dogmas are among the misleading assumptions that 'bewitch' our thought; or, to speak with Michael Silverstein, they are 'linguistic ideologies' that rationalize or legitimize certain linguistic practices. But such ideologies, even if dubious or debatable when made explicit, can still have a productive or positive role to play, in that they may shape our actual linguistic behavior. This leaves us with the challenge of, first, identifying and distinguishing specific language-ideological beliefs and concepts of literal meaning, and, second, of tracing how these have guided, constrained, and regimented actual linguistic practices; but I leave the exploration of this – vast – task for another occasion. If, however, what analytical philosophers have called rational

*Metaphor, minimalism, and semantic indeterminacy*

communication, i.e., the practice of giving and asking for reasons, is as particular, variable and historically contingent a way of regimenting language as the concept of literal language is, then analytical philosophy, semantics and pragmatics have an entire, and largely still unexplored, field of study lying in front of them.

## Literature

- Atlas, Jay David 2005 *Logic, Meaning, and Conversation* (Oxford University Press 2005).
- Atlas, Jay David 2007 'Meanings, Propositions, Context, and Semantic Indeterminacy'. In Preyer & Peter (eds.), pp. 217-239
- Atlas, Jay David 2017 *Disfiguring the Figurative: Metaphor, Irony, Speech Acts and Robert Frost's Philosophy of Language*. MS, draft 4B.1, February 2017
- Bartsch, Renate Bartsch, 'Context-Dependent interpretations of lexical items'. In J. Groenendijk a.o. (eds.) *Foundations of Pragmatics and Lexical Semantics*. Dordrecht: Foris, pp. 1-26.
- Bauman, Richard & Briggs, Charles *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge University Press 2003
- Bergmann, Merrie 'Metaphorical Assertions.' *Philosophical Review* **91** (1982): 229-245
- Bezuidenhout, Anne 'Metaphor and What Is Said: A Defense of a Direct Expression View of Metaphor'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* **XXV** (2001): 156-186
- Black, Max 'How metaphors work: A reply to Donald Davidson'. In Sacks (ed.) 1979, pp. 181-192.
- Borg, Emma *Minimal Semantics*. Oxford University Press 2004
- Camp, Elisabeth 2007 'Prudent semantics meets wanton speech act pluralism'. In Preyer & Peter (eds.), pp. 194-215
- Camp, Elisabeth 2013 'Metaphor and varieties of meaning'. In E. Lepore & K. Ludwig (eds.) *A Companion to Davidson* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 361-378
- Cappelen, Herman & Lepore, Ernie 2005 *Insensitive Semantics*. Oxford University Press.
- Cappelen, Herman & Dever, Josh 2013 *The Inessential Indexical: On the Philosophical Insignificance of Perspective and the First Person*. Oxford University Press
- Carston, Robyn 2010 'Metaphor: Ad hoc concepts, literal meaning, and mental images'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (New Series) **110**: 295-321
- Davidson, Donald 1984 'What Metaphors Mean'. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press), pp. 245-264
- Davidson, Donald 2005 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. In *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford University Press), pp. 89-109
- Frost, Robert 1995 *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. New York: The Library of America
- Grice, H.P. 1957 'Meaning'. *Philosophical Review* **64**: 377-388.
- Kaplan, David 1989 'Demonstratives.' In J. Almog a.o. (eds.) *Themes From Kaplan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 481-563
- Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark 1980 *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leezenberg, Michiel 2001 *Contexts of Metaphor*. Elsevier Science.
- Leezenberg, Michiel 2010 Gricean and Confucian Pragmatics: A Contrastive Approach. In D.F. Shu & K.P. Turner (eds.) *Contrasting Meaning in Languages of the East and West*. Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 3-32
- Lepore, Ernie & Stone, Matthew 2010 'Against Metaphorical Meaning'. *Topoi* **29**: 165-180
- Levinson, Stephen C. 1983 *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David 1979 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game.' *Journal of Philosophical Logic* **8**: 339-359
- Ortony, Andrew (ed.) 1979 *Metaphor & Thought*. Cambridge University Press; second, expanded edition 1993.
- Preyer, G. & Peter, G. (eds.) 2007 *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism*. Oxford University Press
- Recanati, Francois 2001 'What is said'. *Synthese* **128**: 75-91.
- Recanati, Francois 2004 *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard 1979 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, Richard 1987 'Unfamiliar noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor'. *The Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. **LXI**: 283-296
- Sacks, Sheldon (ed.) 1979 *On Metaphor*. University of Chicago Press
- Sellars, Wilfrid 1997 [1956] *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Stern, Josef 1985 'Metaphor as Demonstrative.' *Journal of Philosophy* **LXXXII**: 677-710
- Stern, Josef 1991 'What Metaphors Do Not Mean.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* **XVI**: 13-52
- Stern, Josef 2000 *Metaphor in Context*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Stern, Josef 2009 'Metaphor and Minimalism.' *Philosophical Studies* **153**: 273-298

*Metaphor, minimalism, and semantic indeterminacy*

Sperber, Dan & Wilson, Deirdre 1986 'Loose Talk'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, **LXXXVI**: 153-171.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1994 *Culture and Value* (Revised edition). Oxford: Blackwell