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What's in a Name? The Use of the Stylistic Device *Metonymy* as a Strategic Manoeuvre in the Confrontation and Argumentation Stages of a Discussion

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I investigate the role of the rhetorical trope *metonymy* in arguers' attempts to reconcile their rhetorical with their dialectical aims in the confrontation stage and argumentation stage of a discussion. I show how different types of *metonymies* may help to present a party's position advantageously and to make the strongest case.

KEY WORDS: metalepsis, metonymy, metaphor, strategical manoeuvring, synecdoche

1. INTRODUCTION

Metonymy, 'a figure of speech that consists in using the name of one thing for that of something else with which it is associated' (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*), is traditionally seen as one of the *tropes* -- expressions that are used figuratively. In classical rhetoric, metonymy was considered to be a less important stylistic device than metaphor. Quintilian (1966, VIII.4) considers metaphor to be 'the commonest and by far the most beautiful of the tropes' and more generally applicable than *metonymy* and one of its subtypes, *synecdoche*:

> *Metaphor* is designed to move the feelings, give special distinction to things and place them vividly before the eye, *synecdoche* has the power to give variety to our language by making us realise many things from one, the whole from a part, the *genus* from a *species*, things which follow from things preceded; or, on the other hand, the whole procedure may be reversed. It may, however, be more freely employed by poets than by orators. […] It is where numbers are concerned that *synecdoche* can be most freely employed in prose. (1966,VIII.VI.19-20)

Until recently, in (cognitive) linguistics it was also metaphor that received the most attention. In their influential book *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff and Johnson show that metaphors are part of our everyday way of thinking. Although, as is clear from the title, the book is about metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson also pay some attention to metonymy. Whereas metaphor is, according to them, principally 'a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding', metonymy has 'primarily a referential function,' that is 'it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another' (1980, p. 36).

One of Lakoff's and Johnson's most famous examples of metonymy is (1980, p. 35):

(1)   The *ham sandwich* is waiting for his check.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, this is not an example of a personification metaphor:

> We do not understand 'the ham sandwich' by imputing human qualities to it. Instead, we are using one entity to refer to another that is related to it. This is a case of what we will call *metonymy*. (1980, p. 35)

In other words, whereas metaphors create a relation of similarity between objects from different domains, this is not so with metonymy:

> The name of a referent (or thing referred to) is replaced by the name of an attribute, or entity related in some semantic way, or by spatial proximity, or another kind of link, i.e., the ground of the substitution is not similarity as it is in the case of metaphor, but association. (Thornborrow and Wareing, 1998, p. 109)

In recent publications in the field of cognitive linguistics, it is claimed that metonymy may be a figure of thought that is even more basic to language and cognition than metaphor (Barcelona, 2000, p. 4). Metonymy is in these approaches considered to be a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity provides mental access to another conceptual entity within the same idealized cognitive model (Radden and Kövecses, 1999, p. 21).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 36) had already pointed out that metonymy is not merely a referential device. Metonymy also changes the expressed meaning. Lakoff and Johnson gave the following example to make this clear:

(2)   When we say 'The *Times* hasn't arrived at the press conference yet,' we are using 'The *Times*' not merely to refer to some reporter or other but also to suggest the importance of the institution the reporter represents. So 'The *Times* has not yet arrived for the press conference' means something different from 'Steve Roberts has not yet arrived for the press conference,' even though Steve Roberts may be the *Times* reporter in question. (1980, p. 36-37)

Lakoff and Johnson describe this effect of metonymy on the meaning in terms of the notion of focus: metonymy allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to (1980, p. 37). Metonymic concepts allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 39) or, as Radden and Kövecses put it, metonymy does not simply substitute one entity for another entity, but interrelates them to form a new, complex meaning (1999, p. 19). One of the examples Lakoff and Johnson give to clarify the relation between the two entities involved in the metonymy is that when we think of *a Picasso* (i.e. a painting or sculpture by Picasso), we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, but also of this work of art in terms of its relation to the artist, his conception of art, his technique, etcetera.

From this brief description of metonymy it emerges that although metonymy is primarily a referential device, it can also have other functions. By referring to one entity via another, certain effects may be intended, such as giving extra emphasis to specific aspects, suppressing other aspects, or presenting something from a specific perspective. In this paper, I will give a more detailed overview of the types of effects that may be aimed for by different types of metonymies in argumentative discourse. In order to provide this overview, I shall investigate the possible role of the rhetorical trope *metonymy* in what van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) call the arguers' *strategical manoeuvrings*, that is their attempts to reconcile their rhetorical with their dialectical aims, 'making the strongest possible case while at the same time

avoiding any moves that are clearly unreasonable' (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2002, p. 16). In van Eemeren and Houtlosser's view each of the dialectical stages of a critical discussion has its rhetorical analogue, so for each stage both dialectical and rhetorical objectives can be distinguished. I shall concentrate on the possibilities of manoeuvring strategically in the confrontation stage and argumentation stages of a discussion. My main questions will be: (1) how can metonymy be instrumental to arguers in the confrontation stage in formulating their standpoints in such a way that they become easier to defend, and (2) how can metonymy be of help to arguers in the argumentation stage in presenting their arguments in such a way that they seem as strong as possible, or are more difficult to attack.

I shall first discuss the main types of metonymies that are mentioned in the rhetorical and linguistic literature and try to establish what are, in general, the possible effects of these types of metonymy. Next, I shall make use of this general analysis in my attempt to indicate more specifically what the possibilities for strategical manoeuvring with metonymies in the confrontation and argumentation stages may be. In doing so, I hope to provide more clarity as to the question of why metonymy may be called a rhetorical figure of speech.

2. TYPES OF METONYMY AND POSSIBLE EFFECTS

A general effect that stylistic figures have in the presentation of data, is, according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, to impose or to suggest a choice, to bring about communion with the audience, or to increase the impression of presence (1969, p. 172). From their discussion of examples, it becomes clear that metonymy can have at least the first two of these effects. Although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca believe the function of metonymy is not essentially that of choice, it may serve that function. According to them: 'The use of 'mortals' for instance, in place of 'men,' is a way of drawing attention to a particular characteristic of men' (1969, p. 173-174). This function seems to coincide with the function of highlighting or focussing mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson.

Many metonymic relations are of a symbolic nature. An example is 'the White House' as a symbol of the authorities in the United States and 'the Crown' as a symbol of the monarchy. The connection between the symbol and the thing it symbolizes is not an objective connection, but, according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca one 'that is recognized only by the members of the group' (1969, p. 332). Making use of symbolic types of metonymy may therefore function as a way of bringing about communion with the audience, for instance by strengthening the bonds between members of the audience and the speaker or writer.

Apart from these two general effects that have been ascribed to the use of metonymies, there are also more detailed observations by several authors about the possible effect of particular types of metonymy.

Quintilian does not only mention the type of metonymy called *synecdoche* (nowadays generally considered to be a subtype of metonymy), where the part stands for the whole or a genus for the species, but also the following types of metonymic substitutions:

> To indicate an invention by substituting the name of the inventor, or a possession by substituting the name of the possessor […] that which contains for that which is contained […] The type which indicates cause by effect is common both in poets and orators. (Quintilian VIII.VI. 23-27)

The last type of substitution, *effects for causes,* is also sometimes called *metalepsis.* Lakoff and Johnson's list of examples of metonymic concepts that exist in our culture partly overlaps with Quintilian's enumeration (1980, p. 37-38):

> The part for the whole
> Controller for controlled
> Producer for product
> Object used for user
> Institution for people responsible
> The place for the institution
> The place for the event

Quintilian already indicated that metonymy that concerns numbers, i.e. metonymy of the *synecdoche* type, could be most freely employed by orators (1966, VIII.VI. 20). Modern rhetoricians also devote much attention to the use of *synedoches* for rhetorical purposes. *Synecdoches* can be particularizing (*pars pro toto* or *collective singular* where the singular stands for the plural) or generalizing (*totum pro parte*). In their study on the rhetorics of racism and antisemitism, Reisigl and Wodak mention particularizing *synecdoches* like 'the foreigner,' the 'Jew,' and the 'Austrian' as devices that are used to achieve stereotypical generalisation and essentialisation, by referring in a levelling manner to a whole group of persons (2001, p. 57). A similar generalizing effect can be obtained by *synecdoches* of the *totum pro parte* type, for instance, when one speaks of the opinion of a country as a whole, instead of the opinion of the persons who live there, as in example (3):

(3)   Austria is not willing to accept new immigrants. (Reisigl and Wodak, 2002, p. 57)

Rhetorical effects are also sometimes mentioned in cases of metonymy other than those involving part-whole relationships. Lakoff and Johnson, for instance, point out that by using a *controller for controlled* metonymy it becomes possible to focus on someone's responsibility for some action:

> Via the controller for controlled metonymy we not only say 'Nixon bombed Hanoi' but also think of him as doing the bombing and hold him responsible for it. (1980, p. 39)

Reisgl and Wodak speak of the possibility of using metonymies for masking those responsible for some action: 'metonymies enable the speakers to conjure away responsible, involved or affected actors […], or to keep them in the semantic background' (2001, p. 58). Example (4), one of their examples of a metonymic substitution of the type *product for producer,* is a type of metonymic relation that can be used to this effect:

(4)   *This nationalist discourse* [instead of its responsible creators] instigates people to acts of hostility against 'foreigners.' (2001, p. 57)

Prandi (1992, p. 235) mentions the capability of metonymies involving *causes* and *effects* or *means* and *ends* to present the gist of the matter in an extremely concentrated way, thereby making the argument appear stronger. As an example of how the argumentative force of a long discourse can be strengthened by presenting the argument as it were in one flash, she presents the following slogan that was used in an election campaign (example taken from Bonhomme, 1987)

in which two metonymies are combined, one of the type *the means for the end* and one of the type *the end for the means* (or *the result for the instrument*):

(5)   This pencil is the highway. (*Ce crayon est l'autoroute*)

This elliptical slogan is a short and forceful way of saying: this pencil is the instrument that you can use to choose the candidates who promise to construct the highway if they win the elections. 'This pencil' stands for the action of voting, and is thus a case where the means stands for the end. 'The highway' is the result of voting for a candidate who is going to construct the highway, so here the end stands for the means.

The type of metonymy that involves substituting the cause for the effects or the end for the means, and vice versa, has traditionally been called *metalepsis.* As we already saw in the highway slogan, this type of metonymy allows for a very concise wording of a message. According to Pauwels (1999, p. 262) 'by referring to the result, the metonym focuses the function of the action.' This may be one of the reasons why this form of metonymy is often found in advertisements. But also the opposite type of metonymy may be effective in advertisements. The following example of a *cause for the effect* metonymy given by Leech (1966, p. 183) is from an ad for shampoo:

(6)   Wash the big city right out of your hair.

This slogan is not only more concise than its non-metonymic variant: 'Wash the dirt of the big city right out of your hair,' but it also sounds less crude, or more euphemistic. The latter effect of metonymy is mentioned by several authors, for instance by Pauwels (1999, p. 265), who observes that many examples of metonymy in his corpus seem to serve as euphemisms. Apart from these two effects of this example of a *cause for effect* type of metonymy, a third effect seems to be that various associations that come with a big city, such as crowdedness, noise and stress, can still play a role in the slogan and are not muted as they would be when the non-metonymic version would have been used. These associations can now be transferred to the shampoo that is being advertised, making it a product that cannot just clean your hair, but can also rid you of all the evils of the big city.

3. USING METONYMY STRATEGICALLY IN THE CONFRONTATION AND ARGUMENTATION STAGES

According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser, the parties engaged in argumentative discourse may be assumed to be committed to the dialectical standards of reasonableness, while at the same time attempting to resolve the difference of opinion in their own favour (2001, p. 151). It is this combination of dialectical and rhetorical objectives that typically gives rise to strategical manoeuvring: speakers or writers use the opportunities available in a certain dialectical situation to handle that situation most favourably for them. The dialectical model with its different stages in the resolution process provides a starting-point for a more detailed and systematic specification of the rhetorical objectives of the participants:

> Because what kind of advantages can be gained depends on the dialectical stages, the presumed rhetorical objectives of the participants must be specified according to stage. (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2001, p. 152)

In the confrontation stage, where the difference of opinion is externalized, the rhetorical objective of the participants will be 'to direct the confrontation in the way that is the most beneficial from their own perspective' (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2002, p. 138) In order to define the difference of opinion in such a way that their chances for achieving a favourable result are optimal, arguers will for instance present their standpoint in such a way that it becomes easier to defend or more difficult to attack. This type of strategical manoeuvring does not necessarily run counter to the dialectical standards, according to van Eemeren and Houtlosser:

> There is nothing wrong with any attempts to shape the difference in a way that promotes a resolution in one's own favour, unless the difference is obscured, for instance by mystifying the mutual positions or by immunizing standpoints against criticism. (2001, p.152)

In the argumentation stage, where argumentation is advanced and criticized, arguers' rhetorical objective is 'to make the strongest case and to launch the most effective attack' (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2002, p. 139). In order to make their case seem as strong as possible in the eyes of their opponent, they will, among other things, leave out nuances and uncertainties that might weaken their case, present their arguments in such a way that they are most likely to appeal to their opponent, or formulate their arguments in such a way that they are less likely to raise particular criticisms.

I would now like to look at some examples of how the different types of metonymies discussed earlier can be instrumental in furthering arguers' rhetorical goals in the confrontation and argumentation stages.

As we saw before, metonymies of the *synecdoche* type can be used for purposes of generalization. This type of metonymy can be used both in the presentation of the standpoint (confrontation stage) and in the presentation of the argumentation (argumentation stage). An example of how this type of metonymy may be instrumental to the arguer in the argumentation stage is (7). Here, William Flatt defends his standpoint that it is not a good idea – as others have proposed – to start using weapons of mass destruction in Iraq by means of an argument containing a metonymy of the type *the whole for the part*:

(7)   *America* is not prepared to make an enemy of one quarter of the world through the reckless pursuit of a globalist agenda, claiming to fight terrorism while engaging in terrorism. (Command Briefs, September 2004, William Flatt)

By speaking of *America* instead of 'all' or 'most' Americans, Flatt can give the impression that this is the general opinion of Americans, without having to specify how many people exactly share this opinion. In this way, he can make his argument seem stronger, or at least, harder to attack.[1]

Metonymies of the *symbolic* type can be used to present a standpoint in such a way that it seems self-evident and needs no further defence. Example (8) shows this use of metonymy in the confrontation stage. In the headline of a Dutch newspaper, the symbolic relation between white coats and doctors is used to introduce the position of the author:

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[1] *America* stands for *Americans*, which means that the example can be seen as a case of an *immunization strategy* employed to evade the burden of proof. The use of this strategy is therefore fallacious (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, p. 119).

(8)   **WHITE COATS, DIRTY HANDS**
        The general practitioners have been on strike for three days in an attempt to get higher
        fees (*NRC-Handelsblad*, May 11, 2001).

That the author is critical of the striking doctors is immediately clear from this headline: they
have dirty hands, which implies that they have been involved in some sordid or wrong business.
In the rest of the article, the author argues that doctors do not have the right to behave as normal
employees working in corporations. By using the metonymy *white coats* and contrasting it via an
antithesis with *dirty hands*, the standpoint gives the impression of being self-evident, as if it
needs no further argumentation. Because of the symbolic relation between white coats and the
medical profession, with all the associations that go with it, the contrast between *white* and *dirty*
suggests an inconsistency between the ethically high-principled medical world and the vulgar
business world, or between the ideal and reality: the doctors striking for higher wages.
        Metonymies of the *controller for controlled* type may be of use in the argumentation
stage to enhance the appearance of forcefulness of the arguments. Example (9), for instance,
makes use of this type of metonymy to that end:

(9)   While Bush conquers Iraq, he protects those guilty for funding, training, and harbouring
        the terrorists, as well as those who facilitated the attacks. How anyone could vote for
        such a corrupt figure is beyond me. (www.d12world.Com/board/showthread.php?t
        =121883)

The standpoint that is argued for in this example is that no reasonable person should vote for
Bush. In order to support this negative judgment, examples of wrong actions undertaken by the
Bush government are presented as if they are performed directly by Bush himself, thus
emphasizing Bush's responsibility for all these actions.
        This way of making someone look more responsible for a negative deed or for an action
that has met with criticism is not always appreciated by ordinary language users. In example
(10), a letter writer accuses the liberal media of being biased because of their use of a *controller
for controlled* metonymy when speaking about the war on terrorism:

(10)   Scanning the news this afternoon and came across what appears to be a very biased
        headline and report. Since I have been told by many that there is no liberal bias in the
        media, I will leave it to you to decide.
        Headline: **High Court Deals Blow to Bush's War on Terror**
        Lead Storyline: The U.S. Supreme Court placed the first limits on **President Bush's war
        on terrorism** on Monday and ruled that terror suspects can use the American judicial
        system to challenge their confinement.
        I will have to go back and check to see if it was *Abraham Lincoln's Civil War* or *Harry
        Truman's World War*. If this is the case then another one of Reuters other headlines
        should read *President Bush Liberates 50 Million* or maybe *President Bush Wins Two
        Wars*. Or how about *George Bush Creates Democracy in Iraq in Record Time*.
        (http://www.perryonpolitics. com/movabletype/mt-comments)

The probably pro-Bush letter writer does not accept calling the war in question 'Bush's war on terror.' This is probably because this choice of words makes it seem as if the blow to this war is a sign of Bush's personal failure, a blow to Bush's person. The letter writer argues that the media can only do this if they are also prepared to use this type of metonymy when speaking positively of his government. This example shows that whether this type of strategical manoeuvring will be effective may depend to a large extent on arguers' pre-existing attitudes towards the person whose responsibility is being emphasized.

Metonymies in which *causes* stand for *effects* or *means* for *ends* can also be an effective way of making an argument seem stronger. Earlier, we already came across the example 'This pencil is the highway,' which formed part of an election campaign for the candidates of a party which promised to construct a new highway. The slogan functions as an argument to vote for a specific party, and the formulation in question is very forceful, because it suggests that success is guaranteed. If you replace the metonymic slogan in question by the full non-metonymical statement 'This pencil is the instrument that you can use to choose the candidates who *promise* to construct the highway *if they win the elections,*' there is room for all sorts for doubt. Is it really guaranteed that your vote will have the result that the party in question will win? And is it certain that the party will do as they promise, once in power? Relevant critical questions such as these are pushed to the background because of the chosen presentation.

One last example in which a similar use of metonymy as an attempt to silence possible antagonists is combined with an attempt to formulate the argument in such a way that is it most likely to appeal to the opponent, is (11), presenting a slogan used in a Dutch advertorial for sugar:

(11)   Sugar is energy by nature.

This is again an *end* for the *means* metonymy: sugar is a source of energy, but is presented here as if it were energy by itself. Since energy is generally considered to be a good thing, and sugar *is* energy, and by nature at that, this way of presenting makes sugar seem a very positive product indeed. At the same time, what is suppressed by this presentation is that sugar is just one source of energy, and even a source that has lately been under a lot of criticism. That there may be other and better sources of energy is a criticism that would probably be more easily raised if the non-metonymic phrase 'Sugar is a source of energy' would have been used.

4. CONCLUSION

As I hope to have shown, metonymy may indeed rightly be called a rhetorical figure, in the sense that it can play an important role in arguers' strategical manoeuvrings in the confrontation and argumentation stages of a discussion. By using metonymies, arguers can present their standpoints in such a way that they become easier to defend and they can make their argumentation seem stronger and less open to criticism. Whether these manoeuvrings are reconcilable with the dialectical standards of reasonableness or whether they violate the rules for critical discussion and thus 'derail' as van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002, p. 142) call it, may differ from case to case. In order to say something more general about this issue, the conditions for dialectical soundness for the types of manoeuvring that are at stake should first be identified.

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