Grammatical metaphors in English

Miriam Taverniers
University of Ghent

ABSTRACT

This paper focusses on the concept of 'grammatical metaphor' as it has been introduced in the framework of systemic functional linguistics. It first explains 'metaphor' in general, as it is traditionally known, and renames this, following Halliday, as lexical metaphor. In contrast to this, grammatical metaphor is explained as an alternative, grammatical resource in language. Two types of grammatical metaphor, ideational metaphor and interpersonal metaphor (including metaphors of modality and metaphors of mood) are explained and illustrated.

KEYWORDS: metaphor; grammatical metaphor; systemic functional linguistics; semantics.

1. Introduction

'Metaphor' is a well-known phenomenon in language. It has a very long research tradition which goes back to at least Aristotle, and it has received attention in a myriad of disciplines, including philosophy, linguistics, literary theory, semiotics, stylistics, psychology, pedagogy, and so on. It has been looked upon as a figure of speech, as a trope, a stylistic device, or a pedagogical tool. This paper deals with metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon, i.e. as a feature of language, and focusses on English. It will be explained that, as a linguistic phenomenon, metaphor has two major guises: (1) it can be a lexical mechanism, i.e. a feature which belongs to the lexis or vocabulary of a language; (2) or it can be a grammatical phenomenon, i.e. a special resource of the grammar of a language. In explaining this distinction, I will draw upon the concept of 'grammatical metaphor', which has been introduced in the framework of systemic functional linguistics.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we will have a closer look at the notion of metaphor as it is traditionally conceived of. This discussion will form the basis for exploring an alternative type of metaphor, viz. 'grammatical metaphor', in Section 3. We will then consider some major features of systemic functional linguistics, the framework in which the notion of grammatical metaphor originated (Section 4), in order to come to a wider view of different types of grammatical

metaphor in Section 5. The paper ends with a summary and some suggestions for further reading.

2. Metaphor

Metaphor is derived from the Greek *meta-*, 'beyond' and *phora*, which is derived from *pherein*, 'to carry'. In its original, etymological sense, therefore, metaphor refers to a kind of movement from one thing to another: one thing is carried beyond itself to something different. Consider the following examples:

    (1)   All the senior managers will be <u>swept out</u>.

    (2)   He didn't <u>grasp</u> it.

    (3)   The sky is <u>crying</u>.

The metaphorical nature of each of these examples can be explained by means of a 'from … to …' expression. In (1), *sweep out*, which literally refers to a physical movement by which something is removed from a certain place, is used to refer to a meaning of 'dismissing staff members'. In other words, there is a metaphorical movement from physical action to an abstract notion such as a dismissal. The word *grasp*, which appears in example (2), has as its original meaning 'to seize something and hold it', which is again a physical action. However, in the example, it is used to refer to the understanding of an idea. Likewise, in (3), the action of crying, i.e. 'shedding tears', comes to stand for some other meaning, viz. that of 'raining'.

In the three examples, there is a metaphorical movement from a literal to a new, figurative meaning. In order to explain this movement more precisely, one modern theory of metaphor – viz. the cognitive theory introduced in Lakoff and Johnson's well-known book *Metaphors We Live By* (1984) – has introduced the notions of donor domain and recipient domain. In this view, one area of meaning, e.g. 'to seize and hold something' in example (2) above, serves as a donor to express a different meaning, which is thus a recipient domain, in this case 'to understand an idea'.

The three examples looked at so far illustrate the traditional concept of metaphor. It is the conception of a movement from something literal to a new figurative meaning which enables us to recognize these examples as metaphorical. This movement can also be discerned, with different degrees of ease, in other cases of 'metaphor', such as poetic metaphors (examples 4-5); the special and easily recognizable type of metaphor called personification (examples 6-8); or the less easily recognizable instances of metaphor that we use in everyday speech, and that have become more or less fossilized (examples 9-11):

(4) Observe | the <u>jasmine</u> lightness | of the moon. (W.C. Williams, "To a Solitary Discipline" (see Lakoff and Turner 1989: 140-159))

(5) I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword <u>sleep</u> in my hand
(William Blake, from *Milton*)

(6) the <u>face</u> of a watch

(7) The sun was <u>smiling</u> in the sky.

(8) table<u>legs</u>

(9) Is the <u>flow</u> of time an illusion?

(10) The noise <u>gave</u> me a headache.

(11) His temper <u>rose</u> and his voice <u>fell</u>.

The metaphorical movements in these examples can be summarized as follows:

(4) from flowers (*jasmine*) to the moon

(5) from a process characteristic of living beings (*sleep*) to a state of rest of a sword (personification)

(6) from a part of the human body (*face*) to a part of a watch

(7) from a human physiological-emotional action (*smile*) to the shining of the sun

(8) from a part of the body (*leg*) to a part of a piece of furniture, a table

(9) from a physical movement of water (*flow*) to an abstract movement (or progression) of time

(10) from a physical action of transferring something to someone (*give*) to an abstract process of causing something to someone

(11) from a physical movement (*rise* and *fall*) to an abstract change

So far we have looked at the metaphorical movement from a literal to a figurative meaning. What is kept constant, in each of these movements, is a word, or a lexeme: in a metaphor, one particular word which does have its own literal meaning, is used to express a new figurative meaning. Because it is a lexeme (word) which lies at the basis of the metaphorical expressions above, the type of metaphor these expressions illustrate can be called **lexical metaphor**. Lexical metaphor, thus defined, is a feature which belongs to the lexicon (i.e. the vocabulary) of a language: it refers to the possibility of lexemes to express new, metaphorical meanings.

3. From lexical metaphor to grammatical metaphor

It is against the background of lexical metaphor that Michael Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics, has introduced the notion of 'grammatical metaphor' in the early 1980s (see e.g. Halliday 1985). As typical instances of grammatical metaphor, Halliday considers various types of nominalizations, such as illustrated in the following examples:

(12) John's writing of a letter to his sister surprised me.

(13) They started a letter writing campaign.

In order to see why examples such as (12) and (13) are grammatical metaphors, in Halliday's sense, we can take recourse to the notion of a metaphorical movement, which characterizes metaphors in general, as we have seen in the previous section. In example (12), *John's writing of a letter to his sister* refers to a process taking place at a particular time in reality. Now, according to Halliday, processes are normally expressed by means of a conjugated verb and a number of participants taking part in the activity, with the verb and its participants together constituting a full clause. In this view, the most straightforward encoding of the process referred to in *John's writing of a letter to his sister* is a full clause, such as:

(14) John wrote a letter to his sister (last week …).

What exactly is metaphorical, in an example such as (12), in Halliday's view, is the fact that a process (a verb, *write,* and its participants, *John + a letter + to his sister*) is not realized by means of a clause, but rather by means of another type of form, such as a noun phrase, as in the example at hand. In this sense, grammatical metaphor again involves a type of metaphorical movement: from a process as clause (the default encoding of a process) to a process as noun phrase. Grammatical metaphor is thus based on the variation between something common, standard, default (i.e. a process realized as a clause) and something which is extended from that (i.e. a process realized by some other form, e.g. a noun phrase), and in this sense grammatical metaphor is similar to the traditional type of metaphor looked at above. However, in the case of grammatical metaphor, the two aspects involved in the movement or metaphorical extension no longer refer to lexemes and lexical meanings (as with lexical metaphor). Rather, they refer to *grammatical forms*, or grammatical means of expression, such as a clause and a nominal group. These two aspects – (i) the metaphorical movement and (ii) the variation between grammatical forms – explain the two parts of the notion 'grammatical metaphor'. In order to appreciate the importance and wide-spread nature of grammatical metaphor, however, it is necessary

to first have a look at some general features of systemic functional linguistics in relation to which the phenomenon can be explained.

4. Systemic functional linguistics and the three metafunctions of language

Systemic functional linguistics is a functional theory of language. This means that, broadly speaking, it views language in terms of its functioning in our human lives. In other words, a major underlying question for studying language, in such a theory, is: how does language help us to live our human lives the way we do? Halliday, the founder of the theory, interprets this functioning of language in our lives in terms of three **metafunctions**, which he calls ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The whole model of systemic functional linguistics is based upon the relationship and interaction between three metafunctions.

The ideational metafunction of language deals with language as representation: it focusses on the role of language in representing and shaping reality. Language is able to fulfil this function by subdividing reality into processes that take place, entities that can take part in these processes (living beings; concrete and abstract things), and qualities that we can use to describe these entities. Consider the following examples:

(15) Mary liked the present very much.

(16) The book is very interesting.

Example (15) refers to a process, *like*, which has two participating entities or participants, *Mary* and *the present*. Example (16) illustrates a quality *very interesting* by which the entity *the book* is described. A major aspect of the ideational (or representational) component of systemic functional grammatical models is therefore the classification of different types of processes and the participants they can take.

The interpersonal metafunction deals with language as interaction: if focusses on the role of language in enacting interpersonal relations, and in creating intersubjective positions through linguistic interaction. The working of the interpersonal metafunction can most clearly be seen in language in the expression of subjective meanings through evaluative words (as in *you damn fool, a stupid remark*). Apart from evaluative words in the vocabulary (lexicon) of a language, the grammar of a language also has important interpersonal aspects.

One interpersonal area of grammar which belongs to the interpersonal component is modality. Modality refers to how we express our evaluation about the likelihood

that something will take place in reality. A modal meaning (such as certainty, possibility, probability, and the like) is usually expressed by a modal verb (as in (17)), or by a modal adverb (as in (18)):

(17) She <u>might</u>/<u>may</u>/<u>can</u>/<u>could</u>/<u>will</u> come to the meeting tomorrow.

(18) a. <u>Maybe</u> he hasn't left yet; the lights are still on.

     b. He <u>surely</u> hasn't left yet; the lights are still on.

Another grammatical area which belongs to the interpersonal component of language, is the grammar of mood. This is the grammar of interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives, and the like. The choice between these different mood types enables us (i) to argue about propositions (e.g. we can ask information by means of a question, using the interrogative mood – see example (19); we can give information by means of a statement, using the declarative mood – see example (20)); and (ii) to negotiate about actions to take place (e.g. we can express a command by using the imperative mood – see example (21)):

(19) Where have you put the bottle?

(20) The bottle is in the fridge.

(21) Give me the bottle !

The ideational and interpersonal metafunctions are complementary and constitute the major components of language. In the systemic functional model, they are seen as being further supported by a third metafunction, the textual metafunction, which is of less importance to the aims of this paper. The textual metafunction has to do with the textual organization of language and deals with, for example, the positioning of new information and given information in a longer stretch of discourse.

With regard to the notion of grammatical metaphor, it is also especially the ideational (representational) and interpersonal metafunctions that are important. The examples of grammatical metaphor given in the previous section (examples 12–13) are illustrations of one particular sub-type of ideational metaphor. In the systemic functional model, numerous sub-types of ideational metaphor have been distinguished. In addition to that, the interpersonal component has its own, equally wide-spread, type of grammatical metaphor, viz. interpersonal metaphor. We will explore the various types of grammatical metaphor in the next section.

4. Ideational and interpersonal grammatical metaphor

4.1 Ideational grammatical metaphor

The examples given in Section 2, which are repeated here for ease of reference, have been described as illustrating a metaphorical shift from process as clause to process as noun phrase:

> (12) <u>John's writing of a letter to his sister</u> surprised me.

> (13) They started a <u>letter writing</u> campaign.

In the systemic functional model of language, the notion of a 'process' belongs to the ideational metafunction: a 'process' is one aspect by which we represent and shape the reality we live in as human beings. In the previous section, 'process' has been mentioned as complementary to other ideational notions, viz. 'entity' and 'quality'. With these notions in mind, the nature of the metaphors in (12) and (13) can now be further explained. We have seen above that, in Halliday's view, a process is *normally* expressed by means of a clause, but it can metaphorically be expressed by means of a noun phrase. What is important is that a noun phrase is also the *'normal'* (i.e. default, standard) expression of some other ideational type of meaning, viz. an entity. An entity is normally expressed by means of noun phrase: *a table, the sun, my sister, joy, eight books*. In this sense, in example (12), the form 'noun phrase' is borrowed to metaphorically express the meaning of a process, in the same sense as the lexical metaphor in example (2) (repeated here) borrows the lexeme *grasp* to express the meaning 'understand':

> (2) He didn't <u>grasp</u> it.

   The form of a noun phrase can be borrowed to express processes (which are normally realized by means of clauses), but it can also be used metaphorically to express qualities, which are by default encoded by adjectives. In this sense, (23) is a metaphorical variant of (22):

> (22) She is dishonest.

> (23) You cannot really count on her <u>honesty</u>.

   Another common sub-type of ideational metaphor is where a process (normally expressed by means of clause) comes to be expressed by means of an adjective, and thus, comes to be conceived of as a quality instead. Consider example (25), which is a metaphorical version of (24):

(24) You cannot wash these trousers in the machine.

(25) These trousers are not <u>machine washable</u>.

Ideational metaphor is a powerful resource in the grammar of a language, by which the expression of ideational meanings such as processes, qualities and entities is extended in important ways beyond their default encodings as clauses, adjectives and nouns (or noun phrases) respectively: different forms can be borrowed to express different meanings. Important work on ideational metaphor in systemic functional framework concerns the study of which particular forms can be used to express which particular meanings. In this context, Halliday has proposed a model showing that certain forms (especially noun phrases) are more likely to be used as metaphorical forms than any other types of expressions (see Halliday 1998).

4.2. Interpersonal grammatical metaphor

As we have seen above, the interpersonal component of grammar especially concerns the areas of modality and mood. In these two areas, Halliday also distinguishes between basic, non-metaphorical expressions, and metaphorical ones, i.e. inter-personal metaphors. Let us look at each area in turn.

A default realization of a modal meaning, for example, a degree of certainty, according to Halliday, is by means of modal elements that occur *within* the clause that is being modally evaluated. For example, in order to express the likelihood of John having left already, we can use a modal verb such as *must* (26) and/or a modal adverb such as *certainly* (27):

(26) John <u>must</u> have left (, because the lights are off).

(27) John will <u>certainly</u> have left by now.

Halliday calls these expressions of modality, which occur within the clause structure itself, the basic type. However, the same meaning of likelihood with a high degree of certainty can also be expressed by *adding* more elements to the initial clause *John + have left*. The following examples illustrate just a few possibilities:

(28) a.   <u>I think</u> John has already left.

   b.   <u>It is very likely</u> that John has already left.

   c.   <u>Everyone believed</u> that John had already left.

   d.   <u>It is clear</u> that John has already left.

In each of the examples in (28), the modal meaning (i.e. a high degree of certainty that something is the case) is expressed by elements which lie outside the original clause, and which are based on particular types of verbs, such as *think* (28a) or *believe* (28c), or particular types of adjectives, such as *likely* (28b) or *clear* (28d). Halliday calls such expressions interpersonal metaphors of modality, because the modal meaning is realized outside the clause (in contrast with the standard encoding by means of modal verbs or adverbs, which lie within the clause structure). In this case, again, the metaphors are based on a borrowing: for example the verb *think* can be borrowed to express a modal meaning, as in example (28a).

The second interpersonal area in grammar, according to systemic functional linguistics, is that of mood. In order to understand the notion of interpersonal metaphors of mood, it is necessary to consider, again, what the default types of encoding are. With regard to mood, Halliday distinguishes three major types of interactive functions: statements are expressions which give information, questions are expressions which ask information, and commands are expressions which ask for something to take place. Each of these functions has its standard, default type of encoding: statements are encoded by the declarative, questions by the interrogative, and commands by the imperative, as we have seen in examples (19)–(21) above. The expression of statements and questions is fairly straightforward, but with regard to commands, the situation is different. There is a large variety of expressions that can be used to express the same command:

(29) <u>Send</u> your proposal by email, please.

(30) a. <u>Could you</u> send your proposal by email, please <u>?</u>

   b. <u>I would advise you to</u> send it by email.

   c. <u>You are kindly requested to</u> send your proposal by email.

   d. <u>It is recommended that</u> you send your proposal by email.

   e. <u>It is advisable to</u> send your proposal by email.

The examples in (30) are different metaphorical variants of expressing a command that can also be expressed, in its most straightforward, standard way, as an imperative (29). The metaphorical examples in (30) include the interrogative mood type (which is the standard expression of requests for information), and the declarative mood type (which normally, i.e. non-metaphorically, expresses the speech function of giving information). Halliday brings together these various expressions under the heading of the notion of interpersonal metaphor of mood. The reason why these examples are regarded as metaphorical, lies in the fact that they deviate from the standard, most

straightforward realization of a command by means of the imperative mood. Their metaphorical nature can be made clear by pointing to the literal meanings that these expressions have. For instance, (30a), at face-value, is basically a request for information: 'could you send your proposal by email, or couldn't you'? Similarly, at face-value, (30b) only refers to a statement: I state that I advise something to you.

The metaphorical nature of such metaphors of mood is exploited in verbal play. A case in point is the well-known dinner-table example, where someone asks: *Can you pass me the salt, please?*, and the addressee answers, '*Yes, I could certainly do that*', without undertaking any further action with regard to the salt.

5. Summary

In this paper, we have considered the notion of grammatical metaphor, as it is conceived of in the systemic functional model of language founded by Halliday. We have taken as our starting point the notion of metaphor as it is traditionally known, and re-labelled this notion as 'lexical metaphor' because it is concerned with the words, or the lexicon (vocabulary) of a language. Grammatical metaphor, as we have seen, can be explained in relation to lexical metaphor: it is based on the same metaphorical movement, but it is rooted in the grammar of a language, and thus exploits the grammatical resources of a language. Taking into account the general organization of these resources into different large metafunctions that language serves, we have seen how Halliday distinguished between ideational metaphors, which have to do with alternative ways of construing reality, and interpersonal metaphor, which offer alternative possibilities of expressing modal meanings (metaphors of modality), or exchanging commands (metaphors of mood).

6. Suggestions for further reading

For discussions of grammatical metaphor on an introductory level, see, for example, Downing & Locke (1992) and Thompson (1996). Butt et al. (2000) offer an introduction which is especially written for English language teachers.

Applied areas of study in which the notion of grammatical metaphor has proven to be useful include the following: scientific writing, language development, the teaching of academic writing. For recent representative papers in each of these areas, see Simon-Vandenbergen et al. (eds.) (2003).

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