The Cognitive Role of Metaphors in Processes of Cultural Production

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential of metaphor in the processes of cultural production. The authors believe that the creation of metaphors should be viewed as a mechanism for such production. This approach involves the interpretation of metaphor as a way of creating new meanings. The development of this idea requires a revision of the widespread substitution view of metaphor. So, if the literal meaning is known, the use of metaphors should be considered excessive. To avoid the view of metaphor as a simile or analogy, it must be assumed that through metaphor the common feature is created rather than explicated. To do this, a hypothesis is developed that the primary effect of metaphor is simply to capture imagination.

1. Introduction

Speaking about the role of metaphor, Paul Ricoeur said: “If all language, all symbolism consists in ‘remaking reality’, there is no place in language where this work is more plainly and fully demonstrated” (Ricoeur, 2004, 280). Moreover, “metaphor is that strategy of discourse by which language divests itself of its function of direct description” (Ricoeur, 2004, 292) to reach redescription of reality through the production of new meanings. This thesis about the role of metaphor has become commonplace today.

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Cultural studies can be viewed as the most beneficial sphere where the developed theory of metaphor could find productive use. Modern authors have repeatedly stressed that today culture is treated primarily "as a complex web of symbols and meanings" (Santoro, 2008, 17). On the other hand, Eugene Halton indicates that "one of the glaring holes in most contemporary conception of culture is the lack of attention to the birth of meanings, a lack that applies equally to the term conception. In intellectual discourse, conception connotes, almost without exception, rational beliefs and the gestation of something new, the birth of meaning" (Halton, 1994, 44). The way to solve this problem is often associated with overcoming the dualisms of structure and practice, habit and creativity, synchronicity and dynamics, stasis and change, and with the search in the structure of culture for the possibility of indirection, multiple meanings, and change: "The very fact that structures inherently contain internal ‘resistances’, allows for creative shifts in meaning and action" (Maynard, 2008, 80).

It is reasonable to assume that the mediator in the analysis of the relationship between the structure and the changes may be the idea of cultural practice, or production of culture. Then the theory of metaphor should be considered as a way to explain the mechanism of such production. Actualization of this role of metaphor puts the key question: How does it work? This question is to be discussed in this paper.

2. Methodology

We used the following methods: the hermeneutical method allowed revealing implicit contexts of functioning of the different outlooks on metaphor; the critical method allowed setting limits of using of the outlooks; the comparative method allowed characterizing specifics of the outlooks and their potential for investigations of the cognitive value of metaphors in cultural studies. We elaborated some ideas of later Ludwig Wittgenstein on language games for the rational reconstruction of metaphor functioning in cultural production and explicated this work as a method of transformation of one discourse form into another. In the article we also used the views on metaphor of such authors as Paul Ricoeur, David Davidson, Max Black, who interpret metaphors as a form of indirect relation of language to reality in the processes of communication.

3. Results and discussion

In the definition of the place and role of metaphor, the thesis is quite common that “metaphor transfers the meaning of name or descriptive phrase to an object by analogy or substitution” (Macey, 2000, 250). Max Black, one of the classics of the study of this subject, termed this approach a substitution view. Black wrote: “Any view which holds that a metaphorical expression is used in place of some equivalent literal expression, I shall call a substitution view of metaphor” (Black, 1955, 279). This raises a reasonable question of what this approach results in. According to Black, in this approach “understanding a metaphor is like deciphering a code or unravelling a riddle” (Black, 1955, 280). Ultimately, such use of metaphor is intended to produce only the aesthetic effect: “The purpose of metaphor is to entertain and divert” (Black, 1955, 282). Within this approach, it is the only sphere where metaphor is still required. But, Black concludes, “if philosophers have something more important to do than give pleasure to their readers, metaphor can have no serious place in philosophical discussion” (Black, 1955, 282).

The problem of the substitution view arises when metaphor is ascribed the function of generation of new meanings. After all, if it is presumed that the literal meaning is known, the meaning in metaphorical uses is redundant. If we know in advance on what basis the analogy between love and a rose, man and a wolf, is drawn, there is no need to use metaphors. Why speak metaphorically about things that can be verbalized directly? This is the reason why views of metaphor as a brief comparison or an analogy do not reach their goal. As Donald Davidson observed, such approaches “make the hidden meaning of the metaphor all too obvious and accessible” (Davidson, 1978, 39).

Black tried to solve the problem by applying the approach he called an interaction view of metaphor (Black, 1955, 285). Its essence is in the interpretation of metaphor as interaction between the principal subject and the subsidiary subject (Black, 1955, 286-287). For instance, the metaphor “man is a wolf” has man as the principal subject, and the wolf as the subsidiary one. The subtlety of the proposed theory is as follows. Interaction is not a mere binding of two words by a common attribute. Interaction creates or detects the common attribute. Black explains: “The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man a ‘wolf’ is to evoke the wolf-system of related
common places” (Black, 1955, 288). Thus, “the wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others – in short, organizes our view of man” (Black, 1955, 288). Therefore, the meaning of interaction is not to set or even create a relationship of similarity between the two subjects, but to give new meanings to one of the subjects. This condition allows metaphor to be creative rather than to remain on the sidelines.

This results in a common mechanism for constructing and interpreting metaphors. It suggests a combination of two objects (words, phrases, thoughts, ideas, meanings, senses), where one of them plays the role of the principal subject, and the second -- the role of the subsidiary subject, or the modifier. The function of the subsidiary subject is to use the common associations or literal meanings it possesses and focus our thoughts, attention and interest on the actualization, selection, and organization of certain well-defined characteristics, attributes, and meanings in the principal subject, and the suppression or elimination of others.

Is this enough or is something missing in this scheme? It can be considered correct, yet it requires specifications and clarifications. We must start by clarifying the role of the subsidiary subject. The question is whether the subsidiary subject only actualizes, clarifies, and expresses some of the implicit features in the principal subject or creates them. If we assume the former, with all declarations, metaphor will inevitably be considered a secondary operation. If the principal subject already has all its potential meanings prior to any use of the metaphor, it is reasonable to think these meanings can be actualized in a different way. Then again, metaphor is only an allegory that describes obliquely something that can be verbalized directly, or an optional tool for shifting attention from the explicitly well-known to the implicitly well-known. The solution is to regard metaphor as a tool for creating meanings rather than for merely shifting attention from the existing meaning to another one. According to Ricoeur, “to say that a metaphor is not drawn from anywhere is to recognise it for what it is: namely, a momentary creation of language, a semantic innovation” (Ricoeur, 1995, 174). But this thesis should not be simply proclaimed; it should show how, when and under what conditions it is possible. In other words, it is necessary to show that outside metaphor creation of new meanings is unconceivable, or problematic.

This approach requires the assumption or introduction of some premises. It is necessary to accept Davidson’s thesis that “no theory of metaphorical meaning or metaphorical truth can help explain how metaphor works” (Davidson, 1978, 43). He continues: “What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use” (Davidson, 1978, 43). In other words, we should not distinguish between literal and metaphorical meanings and reduce metaphor to a variant of meanings in order to preserve and develop the idea of the cognitive value of metaphor. Metaphor should be interpreted as an action or operation with objects that have a symbolic nature. So far, following the thoughts of Davidson, we can say that the mechanism of this action is a clash of literal or ordinary meanings. The purpose or function of this operation is to give the principal subject new meanings from the meanings the subsidiary subject possesses.

We should go further in order to develop this position. First of all, metaphor should only be classified as a language game, namely, the interaction of various symbolic complexes rather than extralinguistic objects. After all, if the properties of objects are already known, the substitution view on metaphor is actually reanimated. If they are not known, it makes no sense to use the idea of the object to explain the effect of metaphor. Moreover, the theory of metaphor as a comparison of properties of things (or objects) is elusive here, as, in fact, it does not deal with the properties, but with their linguistic expression.

We should further abandon the idea of distinguishing literal and metaphorical meanings, which leads to the interpretation of metaphor as an allegory or a stylistic ornament. What is more, we should generally refuse to recognize meanings that are finally assigned to a word or a phrase. Otherwise, it will be difficult to explain how the shift of meanings is possible. If metaphors only disguise thoughts or shroud things primary in relation to them, then all sorts of operations with symbolic complexes are doomed to remain a collection of surface, superstructure, minor procedures.

Therefore, language should not be interpreted as a medium between the world and man. Richard Rorty aptly said: “The world does not speak. Only we do” (Rorty, 1989, 6). Thus, “no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate, no deep sense of how things are which it is the duty of philosophers to spell out in language” (Rorty, 1989, 21). If the world does not give us any prompts, for, as Ricouer noted, it appears in language by means of discourse (Ricoeur, 1995, 133), it is reasonable to assume that the meanings of words depend on their context or use. “To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game” (Rorty, 1989, 18). We can develop the idea as
follows: if meanings are created by combinations (language games) with symbols or their complexes, there is no fundamental reason to believe that a particular combination (or rules of its creation) is preferable to another one. It is that, due to the cultural and historical circumstances, some uses have become more common and received the status of standards and assumed respective functions. Also, there is no reason to believe that work on the creation of the meanings of words and phrases is completed, that words and expressions are finally fixed finding their semantic integrity and completeness.

It seems that this approach allows us to explain how various language games are connected, and how the transition from one language game to another is organized. The variety of effects will be achieved through combinations and recombinations of signs, or, rather, due to combining the conventional and the unusual. It is obvious that such an approach, firstly, legitimizes the interpretation of metaphor as an operation with signs and, secondly, allows changing its status from a stylistic ornament to the necessary condition for the creation of new meanings. Metaphor can be interpreted as a way of generating novelty, and novelty as an unusual combination of the usual. The usual provides comprehensibility and acceptability, the combination or collision gives originality. Thus, metaphor will be a way to produce such unusual combinations. According to Ricoeur, “only metaphorical application is peculiar; for extension in the application of a label or a schema must satisfy opposed demands – it must be new but fitting, strange but evident, surprising but satisfying” (Ricoeur, 2004, 279-280). Then, with a certain degree of flatness, we can argue that the phrases “creation of the new” and “creation of metaphor” will be identical, or will tend to be identical.

We should make another radical step to strengthen the thesis on the need and irremovability of metaphor. We should forget the idea of metaphor as a relation of sameness, analogy or similarity. While we believe that metaphors are created on this basis, the idea will be preserved of the secondary character of this operation. The solution to this problem is in the following: To begin with, we should question whether such common ideas about the role of metaphor invert the whole structure of reasoning. Does this mean that only the collision of the words “love” and “rose”, “man” and “wolf” gave appropriate interpretations of the essence of love and man, and not vice versa? Does this mean that cause and effect were implicitly reversed? If we assume that novelty is created by an unusual combination of the usual, the following fact becomes evident. It does not essentially matter whether we say that “man is a wolf” or “man is a fierce and treacherous animal”. What matters is whether we will generate a new idea about man or say a banality. If we say a banality, we will make a conventional combination of signs or meanings. If we try to generate a new idea, we will inevitably seek to make an original combination of elements that create this idea. Thus, the more radically we move from banality to originality, the greater is the need and inevitability of metaphor. The more original the idea is, the more metaphorical it is. Therefore, we should presume there is no similarity which could be taken (even implicitly) as the basis for a combination of the meanings of the words “man” and “wolf”, “love” and “rose”, etc. The lack of similarity is due to the fact that the purpose of creating metaphor is in metaphor itself. In other words, an unusual combination is created just to make an unusual combination, and nothing more. Apparently, this is what Davidson meant saying that “metaphors cannot be paraphrased”, because “there is nothing there to paraphrase” (Davidson, 1978, 32).

But then we have to assume that the mechanism for creating metaphors is not only production of unusual combinations. Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: “When I say that the orders ‘Bring me sugar’ and ‘Bring me milk’ make sense, but not the combination ‘Milk me sugar’, that does not mean that the utterance of this combination has no effect” (Wittgenstein, 2009, 146). However, the mechanism should be found. In other words, to avoid any identification of metaphor with relations of similarity or allegory, we must assume that the primary effect of an unusual combination of the usual is simply to capture one’s imagination. It does not mean that metaphor is created for this purpose. The purpose may consist in producing new meanings. It is possible that the definition of the procedure as a purpose or means characterizes the shift along the axis from the artistic to the scientific work. In any case, the point is that in order to justify the originality and need in metaphor we must allow foreign procedures relevant to the pragmatics of language in the semantic process.

The reasons that make the creators of metaphors produce particular configurations, the images in their mind or their absence are not important. It is a mystery of the creative process. But the aesthetic or rhetorical effect should be considered a primary procedure in the production of metaphor. It is the sound that is originally important, not the meaning. Roughly speaking, it can be any combinations of any signs without a need to have any meaning or imply it.
What are the consequences that follow? Rorty noted: “If it is savored rather than spat out, the sentence may be repeated, caught up, bandied about” (Rorty, 1989, 18). This means the success of a combination is determined by the desire to repeat it, that is, repeating it is the way not to stop the pleasure. Successful formulas tower on piles of bad combinations. The next step is to interpret metaphor, or search for a possible semantic shift. In other words, it is necessary to determine what the phrase “man is a wolf” can mean. We should emphasize that the purpose of the interpretation is not to establish similarities between the principal subject and the subsidiary subject. The purpose is to develop meanings that we can attribute to the principal subject. It is a chance to see the principal subject in a new light. It becomes possible because a purely aesthetic effect caused the combination. Moreover, for the same reason, the combination created can denote anything. What meaning of the word “wolf” can be attributed to the word “man” will depend on the different context of metaphor perception; we cannot know it a priori. The interpretation of man as a fierce and treacherous predator was due not to their actual or potential similarity, but to the generally preferred context of metaphor interpretation. The purpose of the metaphor was not to create similarities, but to expand and enrich the experience of human understanding. The same circumstance creates the prospect of further development of meanings of words in use.

In this case, the interpreter is not important, be it the author or the reader. It is important to believe that the interpretation is not an allegory, not an encrypted puzzle that the wise author addresses to the naïve reader. To do this, we must assume that the creator of metaphor is equal to the reader as metaphor is created for the aesthetic effect it produces. Figuratively speaking, the author says only what is said. Therefore, interpretation is a certain unfolding of metaphor that allows including it into another kind of language games, namely, games for the creation, legitimation and use of meanings.

4. Conclusion

Marco Santoro emphasized that the idea of cultural production is “more a metaphor than an analytic category” (Santoro, 2008, 19). Now we can expand this metaphor and associate cultural production with the creation of metaphors. Moreover, we can argue that cultural production is not similar to metaphor creation, but metaphor creation itself. Thus, the same structure can be observed in the creation of new cultural products, be it values, senses, things, lifestyles. The structure will consist of interactions for the unusual combination of ordinary things and finding such combinations in order to overwhelm, stir imagination, then seduce or entice the listener, the reader and the consumer, thus bringing them on the “right” side. Interest in unusual combinations means that people constantly want to repeat and reproduce them. People long to pronounce new words, whistle new tunes, buy bright things, participate in new situations, as these are sources of positive experiences for them. This will give metaphor an opportunity to turn into the formation of meanings and thus become an immanent part of the cultural space.

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References