A relevance-theoretic perspective on metonymy

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse metonymies from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Metonymy has been considered as an association process between contiguous items within the same cognitive domain or as involving a meaning transfer between properties. These approaches, however, prove inadequate in offering a complete account. I will argue that metonymies are used as reference tools to refer to individuals or objects lying outside their linguistically-specified denotation. I will outline how the intended referent might be identified by the property the speaker singles out for the hearer to focus on. Finally, different metonymic uses in communication will be analysed.

Keywords: metonymy; relevance-theoretic perspective, intended referent, meaning adjustment

1. Introduction

Traditionally, metonymy has been regarded as “a figure of speech which consists in substituting for the name of a thing the name of an attribute of it or something closely related” (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1993, p. 398). Typical cases of metonymy substitution include author for work, institution for person, object for possessor, place for event, etc., as the following examples show:

1. The crown objects to the proposal.
2. The sax has the flu.

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3. Americans protested during Vietnam.

So metonymy has been treated as a departure from the literal meaning used for rhetorical or literary purposes (like metaphor, synecdoche, hyperbole, etc.) and based on a contiguity relation between a semantic referent and the actual referent. More recent definitions of metonymy consider it a cognitive process with contiguity operating between two conceptual entities within the same domain (Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Panther & Thornburg, 2002). However, this treatment of metonymy has little explanatory power, because no explanation is offered as to when and why metonymies are used, how hearers derive their meanings or how the contiguity relation works. So in order to get a deeper insight into metonymy, I will analyse the use and interpretation of metonymies in verbal communication.

My paper is structured as follows: section 2 will briefly look at previous accounts of metonymy within Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics. After briefly outlining the Relevance Theory approach to lexical pragmatics, in section 3 I will propose a pragmatic approximation to the study of metonymy based on the reference transfer. Finally, section 4 deals with the different uses of metonymy in communication.

2. Previous accounts of metonymy

2.1. Metonymy as a transfer

Nunberg (1979) analysed metonymy as a case of ‘deferred reference’ or ‘reference transfer’, i.e. a mechanism by which a speaker describes something a and succeeds in referring to some other thing b. To show his point he proposed the following well-known example, uttered by a waiter in a restaurant:

4. The ham sandwich is sitting at table 20.

In (4), the customer is identified by his relation to the dish he has ordered. This metonymy involves a reference transfer, which implies that the transfer operates on the noun phrase (NP) interpretation (the ham sandwich). The hearer picks out the intended referent via a referring function with the highest cue-validity that allows him to identify the intended referent most easily in terms of its relation to the demonstratum (Nunberg described the psychological notion of “cue-validity as the probability with which a given referent b can be identified as being the value of a certain function f at a demonstratum a” (Nunberg, 1979, p. 160)). Thus, the function mapping orders to customers acquires high cue-validity against a set of contextual assumptions shared by waiters.

Sag’s criticism of metonymy involving a sense transfer rather than a reference one was taken into Nunberg’s later metonymy analysis (1995, 2004) as a case of meaning transfer, which “is the process that allows us to use an expression that denotes one property as the name of another property, provided there is a salient functional relation between the two” (Nunberg, 2004, p. 346). That is, it exploits a salient correspondence between properties associated with the lexical meaning of an expression, instead of relations between individuals or entities, as it happened in the reference transfer. Consider the following examples (taken from Nunberg 1995, 2004):

5. Who is the ham sandwich?
6. The ham sandwich is at table 7.
7. [A customer giving her key to an attendant at a parking lot]: I am parked out back.

Meaning transfers can operate on the linguistic meaning of common nouns in predicate or referring position (as in (5) and (6), respectively) or apply to predicates of any kind (as in 7). In (5-6), customers acquire their most distinctive and noteworthy properties by their relations to the dishes they order whether in predicate or referential position. The meaning transfer from orders to customers is useful for picking out the individual who has the property of being the ham sandwich customer. Unlike in his previous analysis of (4), Nunberg now claims that the relevant property is expressed by the linguistic meaning of the common noun ham sandwich rather than the whole NP, as the determiner in the ham sandwich does not presuppose the existence of a unique hand sandwich, but does presuppose the existence of a unique ham-sandwich customer. It is, thus, a case of meaning transfer instead of
reference transfer. The predicate *parked out back* in (7) has a transferred sense, which supplies a property of people whose cars are parked out back, and must fulfill a criterion of noteworthiness in that the derived property contributed by the new predicate is a noteworthy feature of the bearer.

Although Nunberg presents very interesting and challenging data on the meaning transfer involved in metonymies, his approach does not explain how those meaning transfers work, that is, how the process of associating properties to objects or individuals is contextually constrained to get the intended referent. In this sense, Ward (2004) has raised some doubts about the meaning transfer operating on the common noun rather than on a reference transfer operating on the whole NP, since if the meaning of the common noun is transferred (that is, *ham sandwich* in (5-6)), but there is no referent of the NP evoked in the interpretation of the metonymy (i.e. a unique or salient sandwich), then it is not clear how the hearer identifies the intended contextual meaning (*the ham sandwich customer*). A further question that arises here is how to analyse metonymies involving proper names in this approach, since these have no meaning to be transferred. Ward (2004) states that Nunberg’s nominal transfer mechanism would not work in the absence of a common noun upon which to base the transfer. To illustrate his point he provides the following example:

8. [Family members discussing Secret Santa assignments]
   Who’d you get? I’m Anne.

In (8), the only possibility within Nunberg’s approach would be predicate transfer, with the predicate *be Anne* contributing the noteworthy property of ‘being Anne’ and undergoing a meaning transfer to provide the property of ‘being the family member assigned to Anne’. Hence, Ward concludes that similar uses like (5) and (8) would have different analyses. Moreover, as Falkum (2011, p. 209) rightly points out, meaning transfer seems to be a linguistic process pragmatically constrained on its application, rather than a whole pragmatic process, as it was reference transfer. Finally, Nunberg’s notion of noteworthiness of a property as a pragmatic condition on meaning transfer has little explanatory power. It is not clear what the conditions for a property to be ‘noteworthy’ are, that is to be “useful for classifying or identifying its bearer relative to the conversational interests” (Nunberg, 2004, p. 349); and why this criterion is only a necessary condition for predicate transfers, not for nominal transfers.

### 2.2. Conceptual metonymies

The claim that metonymies involve a system of mappings within a single domain is central to the cognitive linguistic approach. Metonymies are defined as a conceptual phenomenon that takes one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and uses it to refer to another thing as a whole or part. Thus, metonymy relies on an association or conceptual mapping between two contiguous items within the same cognitive domain or domain matrix, distinguishing it thus from metaphor which links concepts across different domains and is based on similarity rather than contiguity (Gibbs, 1994, 1999, 1999; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Turner, 1980):

9. *The sax* has the flu today.

In (9), the player of the sax is accessed via the musical instrument by virtue of the metonymical pattern OBJECT FOR USER (Benczes et al., 2011; Dirven & Pörings, 2002; Gibbs, 1994; Panther & Radden, 1999; Radden et al., 2007).

The term (conceptual) contiguity has been used to describe entities associated in experience or culture (Lakoff & Turner, 1980), encyclopaedic knowledge within a domain (Croft, 1993), or the relation between a concept and the frame/scenario itself (Koch, 1999; Panther & Thornburg, 1999). There are many types of contiguity relations (Cruse, 2000): CONTAINER FOR CONTAINED (*Room 44 wants a bottle of champagne*), WHOLE FOR PART (*Do you need to use the bathroom?*), PART FOR WHOLE (*I noticed several new faces today*), PLACE FOR INSTITUTION (*The White House denies the allegations*), etc.

Hence, contiguity seems to be a heterogeneous term comprising a wide range of different cognitive relations. Therefore, “contiguity by itself cannot tell us why many “metonymic” semantic shifts cannot happen” (Croft, 2006,
p. 317). Furthermore, relying on an exhaustive list of metonymic patterns contributes little to the understanding of metonymies (Papafragou, 1996; Song, 1998). Consider the conceptual metonymy OBJECT FOR USER (taken from Papafragou, 1996, p. 174):

10. The buses are on strike.
11. I wouldn’t marry a Mercedes but I could live with a Volvo.

As Papafragou notes (1996, pp. 174-175), if the same conceptual metonymy underlay several metonymic expressions, then there should be no difference in the comprehension of examples (10-11) and creativity in metonymy would be out of the question. Besides, a new metonymic mapping such as VEHICLE FOR DRIVER could be postulated to explain the examples above, but this would lead to an endless list of metonymies. A further question to be addressed by this approach is how hearers know which conceptual metonymy the speaker meant from the list of metonymies provided. Finally, no account is provided of how metonymies are triggered or of the role the context plays in the interpretation of metonymies. Thus, a pragmatic approach to metonymies is needed to account for their processing and understanding in everyday speech.

3. Relevance theory and lexical pragmatics

3.1. Lexical adjustment processes

Relevance Theory (RT) has developed a unitary lexical pragmatic account to investigate “the processes by which linguistically-specified (‘literal’) word meanings are modified in use” (Wilson, 2003, p. 343). The meanings of words are usually pragmatically adjusted and fine-tuned in context, resulting in the construction of ad hoc concepts from their lexically encoded meaning during online comprehension. The two main types of lexical adjustment processes are narrowing and broadening. The former involves the use of a word conveying a more specific sense than the encoded one, having so a more restricted denotation, as in (12-13):

12. I have a temperature.
13. I’m not drinking tonight.

In (12), temperature conveys the sense of ‘an abnormally high temperature caused by fever or illness’ rather than the encoded sense ‘the degree of hotness or coldness of a body’. Likewise, drink in (13) might be understood as expressing not that the speaker will not drink any liquid at all (encoded sense), but that she will not drink any alcohol. The latter, broadening, involves the use of a word to convey a more general sense than the encoded one, expanding the linguistically-specified denotation, as in (14-15):

14. The soup is boiling.
15. Joan is an angel.

For instance, in (14) boiling would be understood as a hyperbole referring to the soup being much hotter than expected or desired, and in (15) angel might evoke an outstanding type of kindness and goodness Joan has (Carston, 2002; Wilson & Carston, 2007).

3.2. Can metonymies be accounted by the same mechanisms of conceptual adjustment?

Metonymies do not involve the use of a word to convey a more restricted or more general sense than its linguistically-specified denotation. For instance:

16. The piano is in a bad mood.
17. The White House isn’t saying anything.
In (16) the piano refers to the piano player and in (17) the White House refers to the President of the White House in the United States. No logical or contextual implications are shared between the communicated concepts, ‘piano player’ in (16) and ‘the President of the White House’ in (17), and the one encoded by the utterances, the piano and the White House, respectively. Thus, they do not constitute cases of narrowing or broadening of the encoded concept (Carston, 2010, 2011; Wilson & Carston, 2007). Rather, they involve a transfer of reference (Jiang, 2013; Nunberg, 1979) or the novel fixation of reference for an existing expression (Papafragou, 1996), as they refer to objects which lie outside their linguistically-specified denotation.

In this sense, Kaplan (1989, pp. 559-561) claims that speakers can create and use proper names to refer to a given object irrespective of any previous meanings associated with the expression. This intention of the speaker to create a new meaning for the expression rather than to use its conventional, semantic meaning is called ‘referential intention’ (Kaplan’s notion of referential intention is closely related to Donnellan’s notion of ‘referential use’ of a definite description that Kaplan extends to proper names), and it results in an internal, subjective dubbing, as in Kaplan’s example:

18. Hi-ya, Beautiful.

Papafragou argues that creative metonymy bears a relation to examples such as (18), as she considers metonymy “a variety of interpretive use which (i) introduces a new name; (ii) has as its intended referent something which does not fall under the normal denotation of the expression” (1996, p. 181). For instance, in (16) the expression, the piano, has been used to identify a specific individual who plays the piano and who is not part of the denotation of the piano. Likewise, the White House in (17) seems an appropriate way to identify the President of the USA.

3.3. How is the intended referent identified?

The linguistic meaning of metonymies is a clue to the speaker’s meaning that the hearer has to interpret, using background knowledge as well, in order to access the intended referent. Thus, it is the speaker’s responsibility to formulate the metonymy in such a way that the hearer is able to access the intended referent. In order to do so, the speaker singles out a salient property to enable the hearer to focus on that piece of information and to think of the referent as something the person or the object is. Individuals and objects can be identified through their salient properties. According to Papafragou (1996), salience is essentially perceptual and captures every kind of property that may be focused upon through selective attention. Some research (Glenstrup & Engell-Nielsen, 1995) has shown that the visual selective attention mechanism seems to compute ‘feature difference maps’ along several dimensions of features that are added together to then select first the properties of the objects and individuals with the highest difference sum.

While it is true that saliency is in many cases a perceptual phenomenon that constrains the search for potential referents to those individuals or objects that are close or visible to both speaker and hearer, I believe that interpreting a metonymy also involves taking into account the speaker’s intentions and attitude. As Powell (2010, p. 164) claims, a speaker does not need to pick out the most salient object or person in the perceptual, physical context, but the unique relevant object or person in the conversational context. Let us consider the following examples:

19. Where’s the Brain that we need?
20. The pen is mightier than the sword.

The referents the Brain, and the pen and the sword are referring to in (19) and (20), respectively, are not in the perceptual, physical context of the speaker and hearer, but rather pick out individual concepts that the speaker singles out as relevant in the context to communicate the intended referents: the much-needed intelligent person in (19) or the power of words or communication as opposed to force in (20).

Thus, metonymies can be considered as reference tools used by speakers to pick out particular entities so that they can talk about them. Isolating the most salient or relevant property of objects and individuals is a way for the hearer to constrain the identification of the speaker’s intended referent. Following Powell’s account on the reference
of singular expressions (2010) according to which singular expressions encode constraints on the mapping from linguistic to conceptual representation leaving the rest to pragmatics, it could be argued that metonymies also encode the same two constraints as singular expressions. A first general constraint shared by all metonymies is that these are tools for communicating individual concepts. And a second constraint of the linguistic meaning introduces a specific property which guides the hearer through the inferential process of utterance interpretation towards the intended referent in that context. For each type of singular expression, Powell claims that the type of property encoded is different. Thus, in the case of proper names, the speaker associates that concept with the information \( x \) is called PN; in the case of definite descriptions, they introduce a uniqueness feature into the interpretation process, \( x \) is uniquely \( F \). Let us illustrate this with the following examples:

21. Green Jacket looks like he’s having a good time (Powell, 2010).
22. The hot dog left without paying

In (21), the proper name Green Jacket refers to the optimally relevant individual appropriately related to the information \( x \) is called Green Jacket. This specific property given by the proper name guides the hearer through the inferential process by facilitating the reference the speaker is referring to, namely the bearer of a green jacket. In (22), what is linguistically encoded by the hot dog is an individual concept associated with the information \( x \) is a unique hot dog that constrains the hearer’s search for the intended referent. The gap between the linguistic meaning and the speaker-intended referent is given by the inferential pragmatic processes guided by the hearer’s expectations of relevance.

So what happens in metonymy is that a speaker, wanting to convey the presumption of optimal relevance, makes a property of one particular object or individual as accessible as possible in a given context to minimise the hearer’s processing effort, so that he can test some hypotheses in order of accessibility. Likewise, a speaker, aiming to maximise the relevance of her metonymy, should not allow more than one referent which satisfies the hearer’s expectation of relevance so as not to run the risk of forcing the hearer to choose between competing interpretations. The hearer assumes that the speaker has selected the most relevant stimulus for him to identify the referent. The most accessible referent of the metonymic utterance which satisfies the hearer’s expectations of relevance will be the intended referent. Hence, reference assignment within RT implies, on the one hand, the decoding of the encoded linguistic meaning which is usually underdeterminate (Carston, 2002) and, on the other hand, the pragmatic inference machinery, which takes the encoded linguistic meaning and by a process of parallel adjustment builds the implicated meaning and the propositional content.

4. Use of metonymies in communication

The first use consists in creating a new word or a new name for the intended referent (what Kaplan called dubbing) when the speaker does not know the name or does not want to reveal the real identity of the referent, as in (21-22). In those cases, speakers create ad hoc names to fill a slot in the vocabulary as the most economical-efficient way to identify an individual. Some authors have suggested that metonymies used among professionals or sub-groups of language users operate on the basis of mutually manifest assumptions recurrently used or as productive ‘mini-codes’ for quick and easy referent identification purposes (Falkum, 2011; Jiang, 2013; Papafragou, 1996). In (21), the nickname Green Jacket constitutes the easiest and most efficient way of identifying someone in a crowd. The hot dog in (22) provides easy access to identify the referent in a restaurant where waiters may probably know nothing about their customers except their orders. Therefore, this piece of information is more relevant to them than other properties. So these instances of naming are very common in verbal communication: clothes, sport (baseball or football) teams, food orders, instruments, illnesses, authors, physical attributes, etc. seem to be good ways to identify individuals or objects.

The second metonymic use involves referential shorthands, i.e. an abbreviated way of referring to individuals or objects when the literal description is longer (Jiang, 2013; Nunberg, 2004; Papafragou, 1996), as in (23-24):

23. I drive a BMW (car).
24. Jane is reading Shakespeare (‘s books).

In these cases, metonymy proves to be the most efficient way to economise processing effort in identifying the reference. Again, it is speaker’s responsibility to decide how to produce the metonymic expression so as to lead the hearer to the intended referent in the most economical-efficient way. Falkum (2011) describes examples like (23-24) as instances of systematic polysemy with a metonymic basis, since these metonymies depend upon definitional or highly central properties of the denotations of the vehicle expressions, to the extent that thinking of the denotation implies thinking of this property. For instance, in (23) there is no way speakers can talk about BMWs without thinking of cars. In (24), the property of being a writer is probably the most salient property that speakers relate to the name Shakespeare, so that a representation of his work may be more readily accessible than a representation of the writer himself.

Finally, metonymies can be used creatively to give rise to some humorous or poetic effects, expressing the speaker’s attitude towards the referent. Consider (25-26):

25. My own blood can’t do that to me.
26. Peter finally married money.

In these examples, metonymies do not only identify the speaker-intended referent but also show the speaker’s attitude towards it. In (25), the metonymy, my own blood, draws the hearer’s attention to a specific property of the referent (i.e. the property of being the own family of the speaker), but it also allows the speaker to express her attitude of disappointment and incredulity towards her family’s behaviour. This metonymy does not only facilitate reference, but it also conveys an array of poetic effects brought about by the speaker’s attitude. Likewise, the humorous and ironical overtones used by the speaker to identify Peter’s wife in (26) outweigh the extra processing cost incurred by the metonymic use (rather than naming Pete’s wife), and allow the hearer to infer the speaker’s (negative) attitude towards her.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined a relevance-theoretic approach to metonymy. First, I have analysed metonymies as cases in which the speaker intentionally uses a word to pick out a referent which lies outside the literal denotation of that word, being thus used as reference tools. Then, I have claimed that metonymies encode two types of constraints, namely as tools to communicate individual concepts and to introduce a specific property, different for each type of metonymic expression. This property guides the hearer through the inferential process of utterance interpretation towards the speaker-intended referent in a given context. The intended referent is identified by the salient or accessible property that a speaker aiming at the presumption of optimal relevance singles out for the hearer to focus on. Therefore, the hearer infers that the most accessible referent of the metonymic utterance which satisfies his expectations of relevance will be the referent intended by the speaker. Finally, I argue for different types of metonymic uses, namely ad hoc naming for identification purposes, referential shorthands to economise on the processing effort and metonymic uses conveying via humorous or poetic effects the speaker’s attitude towards the referent.

References
