

Metonymy

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1 The rhetorical tradition

Metonymy (Greek *μετωνυμία* ‘change of name’) is one of the major figures of speech recognized in classical rhetoric. One of the earliest definitions of metonymy is attributed to the treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (see Koch 1999: 140). The anonymous author characterizes metonymy as “a trope that takes its expression from near and close things [‘ab rebus propinquis et finitimis’] by which we can comprehend a word that is not denominated by its proper word” (translation by Koch 1999: 141). This ancient characterization already points to the notions of *contiguity* and *substitution* that have ever since been criterial in distinguishing metonymy from metaphor.

Traditionally, metonymy has been regarded as a *stand for* relation in which the name of one thing, the *source* or *vehicle*, is used to refer to another thing, the *target*, with which it is associated or to which it is contiguous. This view can be called the *substitution theory* of metonymy. A corollary of the substitution theory is that the source and the target are, at some level of analysis, considered to be equivalent ways of picking out the same referent. For example, in the sentence *Buckingham Palace issued a statement this morning* the place name *Buckingham Palace* (source) may be said to stand for the British Queen or one of her spokespersons (target). Under this view, the source expression indirectly achieves the same referential purpose as the more direct referring expression *the Queen*. The substitution theory is, however, too simplistic in at least two respects. First, it typically focuses only on cases of *referential* metonymy, neglecting the fact that there are also *predicational* and *illocutionary* metonymies. For example, in *She is just a pretty face* the noun phrase *a pretty face* is not used referentially but predicatively (see 3.3). Second, as Radden and Kövecses (1999: 18) point out, metonymy is more than just a matter of substitution. *A pretty face* is not just a substitute expression for *a pretty person* but also highlights the prettiness of the person’s face, from which the prettiness of the person can be inferred. Thus the above sentence expresses more content than ‘She is just a pretty person’.

2 Metonymy as a conceptual and pragmatic phenomenon

Recent studies have shown that metonymy is more than a rhetorical trope, i.e. not just a matter of words but is deeply rooted in human cognition. Metonymic reasoning is in fact a pervasive and ubiquitous phenomenon (see Gibbs 1994). An important facet of conceptual metonymy is that it provides the basis for pragmatic inferences. These two aspects of metonymy are elaborated below.

2.1 Metonymy as a conceptual phenomenon

The conceptual nature of metonymy has been demonstrated by Lakoff (1987: 77-90) in his study of the source of prototype effects. For example, the term *mother* evokes prototype effects of a housewife mother. The source of these effects is the social stereotype of mothers

as housewives in our culture. The relationship between mothers and housewives is metonymic and operates only on the conceptual level: the category MOTHER is metonymically associated with the subcategory HOUSEWIFE MOTHER as one of its members. Social stereotypes establish one type of metonymic model in which A MEMBER OF A CATEGORY STANDS FOR THE CATEGORY; other models include ideal members, paragons, generators, submodels, and salient examples.

Various cognitive linguists have described the conceptual basis of metonymy using the notions of ‘conceptual frame’ or ‘Idealized Cognitive Model’ (ICM). Frames are “mental representations of typical situations in life and their typical elements” (Blank 1999: 173); ICMs also include the idealized aspect of complex knowledge structures (Lakoff 1987). The elements of a frame or ICM are interrelated, i.e. conceptually contiguous. Any frame element evokes the frame as a whole and, concomitantly, other elements within the frame network. For example, the BOOK frame involves books and parts of books like book covers and pages, an author, a publisher, etc. Since these elements are conceptually contiguous, they may be exploited by metonymy. Thus we may refer to a book by naming its author or speak of a hardcover without mentioning *book*.

A widely accepted definition of metonymy based on the notion of ICM and inspired by Langacker (1993) is the one proposed by Radden and Kövecses (1999: 21): “Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model.” The notion of cognitive model is taken in its broadest sense, encompassing three “ontological realms”: concepts, forms (especially linguistic), and things and events in the “real world.” Over these realms potential metonymic relations are defined: (i) the sign relation between form and concept (e.g. the relation between the form *house* and the concept HOUSE), (ii) “referential” relations (e.g. the relation between the form *house* or the concept HOUSE and the actual referent, i.e. a concrete house or the set of houses), and (iii) the relation between one sign (Concept-Form) and another sign (Concept-Form), which they call ‘concept metonymy’ (e.g. *bus*-BUS standing for *bus driver*-BUS DRIVER).

Ruiz de Mendoza (2000) proposes that conceptual metonymies can be reduced to two kinds: Either the source of the metonymic operation is in the target (‘source-in-target’ metonymy) or the target is in the source (‘target-in-source’ metonymy). For example, for *The ham sandwich is waiting for his check* Ruiz de Mendoza argues (2000: 114f.) that the contiguity link between HAM SANDWICH and RESTAURANT CUSTOMER is not a part-part relation in the domain RESTAURANT but rather a source-in-target metonymy where HAM SANDWICH is conceptualized as being within the target domain CUSTOMER. As an example of target-in-source metonymy Ruiz de Mendoza (2000: 127) cites *I broke the window*, which in most situations conveys that it is not the window as a whole but typically only the windowpane that was broken.

Metonymy has traditionally been seen in contrast to metaphor. In cognitive linguistics, both metaphor and metonymy are analyzed as conceptual projections, or mappings. Metaphor is regarded as a mapping from one conceptual domain into another conceptual domain, while metonymy is viewed as a mapping within one cognitive domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff and Turner 1989: 103ff). The notion of domain is particularly relevant for metonymy. Croft (1993: 348) views metonymy as a process of *domain highlighting*: “metonymy makes primary a domain that is secondary in the literal meaning.” Thus in the utterance *The Times hasn’t arrived yet* in the sense of ‘the journalist writing for the Times hasn’t arrived yet,’ the noun phrase *The Times* metonymically highlights a subdomain of the conceptual frame it evokes, which is usually only secondary.

The sharp distinction between metaphor and metonymy drawn in the early days of cognitive linguistics can no longer be upheld. Some scholars (e.g. Barcelona 2000, Radden 2000, Ruiz de Mendoza 2000) have claimed that the borderline between the two is often blurred. For example, expressions such as *high prices* have traditionally been analyzed as involving two domains, quantity and height, and hence as instances of the conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP. They may, however, also be seen as involving only one experiential domain and hence be treated as a metonymic mapping, UP FOR MORE.

2.2 Metonymy as a pragmatic phenomenon

Metonymic links are used for *reasoning* or *inferencing* purposes. Like implicatures, metonymies can become completely *conventionalized*, i.e. end up as senses of a polysemous word. A metonymy may thus relate established senses of a word, but it may also be used in communication situations to produce novel meanings. For example, *potbelly* has two entrenched lexical senses, ‘large round stomach’ and ‘person with large round stomach’, that are related by the metonymy SALIENT BODY PART FOR PERSON; this same metonymy can also be used productively to yield pragmatically derived meanings like *balloon-nose*, *fatface*, *skinny-legs*, etc. Such usages can be considered evidence that this metonymy is still a cognitively active process.¹

Metonymic links can be regarded as natural inference schemata (see Thornburg and Panther 1997, Panther and Thornburg 1998, Panther and Thornburg 2003a). There are some interesting parallels between Lakoff’s (1987) metonymic models and what Levinson (2000: 37) calls the *I*-Heuristic (where *I* stands for ‘Informativeness’) in his theory of generalized conversational implicature. Levinson (2000: 37) argues that lexical items routinely implicate stereotypical pragmatic default readings: “What is expressed simply is stereotypically exemplified.” When, for example, the word *mother* is used, the stereotypical concept HOUSEWIFE MOTHER (see 2.1) is automatically implicated. As an implicature, it is however cancelable without contradiction. Thus *She is a mother of two daughters but she is not a housewife* is semantically well formed. Defeasibility seems to apply to metonymy in general (for further discussion, see 4.2).

3 Metonymy in language

3.1 Metonymy and lexical semantics

Studies in metonymy have traditionally focused on how metonymy affects the senses of words. It is in the lexicon that the ubiquity of metonymy is most apparent, both synchronically and diachronically. Standard examples on the synchronic level include: *The kettle is boiling* (CONTAINER FOR CONTENT), *Jonathan is in the phone book* (PERSON FOR NAME), etc. Like metaphors, metonymies form systems that may structure larger conceptual domains in a coherent way. For example, terms for articulatory organs such the tongue (e.g. Latin *lingua*, Russian *jazyk*, Finnish *kiele* ‘language’), the mouth (German *Mundart* ‘dialect’), and the lips (Hebrew *safa* ‘language’) are cross-linguistically used to metonymically stand for notions such as SPEECH, LANGUAGE, and many other areas relating to speaking and communicating (see Radden 2002).

Metonymic processes on the diachronic level have been long noted by historical linguists and amply demonstrated since the 19th century (see Ullmann 1962). Koch (1999: 148f.) has

¹ An analogous argument is developed in Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 66f.) with regard to metaphors.

observed systematic cross-linguistic metonymic shifts in a number of conceptual frames. For example, in the MARRIAGE frame, a preparatory status (*fiancé(e)*) may stand for the status of being married : Latin *sponsus*, -a ‘fiancé(e) > ‘bride(groom)’ > Popular Latin ‘husband/wife’, as in Spanish *esposo*, -a, French *époux*, -se.

3.2 Metonymy and grammar

The impact of metonymy on grammatical structure has gone unnoticed for a long time, probably because grammatical metonymy is not as conspicuous as lexical metonymy. Like lexical metonymies, grammatical metonymies operate both on the synchronic and diachronic levels.

In cognitive linguistics it is generally assumed that grammatical constructions are carriers of meaning independent of the lexical items they contain (Goldberg 1995, Croft 2001). The lexical items used in a construction, especially the meanings of the verb and its argument structure, have to be fitted into the construction frame, but there are cases where a conflict between constructional meaning and lexical meaning arises. Usually, this conflict is resolved by *coercion* (cf. Pustejovsky 1993). In general the construction imposes its meaning on the verb meaning. For example, Panther and Thornburg (2000) consider *stative* predicates such as *know*, (*be*) *rich* and *love* in ‘action’ constructions, i.e. imperatives, infinitival complement clauses that require action verbs, etc. They show that, despite the semantic conflict between stativity and action, such sentences are possible if the state expressed by the predicate can be interpreted as the *result* of an action. In such cases, the action construction forces an action interpretation on the stative predicate. Thus, the slogan of the American news network CNN *Be the first to know* is acceptable because the verb phrase *be NP* is interpretable as the effect of an intentional act of the hearer (‘Do something [viz. watch CNN] so that, as a result, you are the first to know’). The conceptual shift at work here is based on the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymy. In contrast, the imperative *Be tall!* is pragmatically odd: An action interpretation induced by the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymy is hardly conceivable because ‘tallness’ is not seen as the outcome of an intentional act.

Metonymic coercion also seems to play a role in the interpretation of other non-finite clauses that involve the problem of “control” (see Panther 2001). For example, in *The teacher asked Johnny to go the bathroom*, the usual (unmarked) interpretation is that Johnny is supposed to go to the bathroom—i.e., the object of the main clause “controls” the reference of the understood subject in the infinitive clause. In contrast, in *Johnny asked the teacher to go to the bathroom*, the most likely interpretation is that the referent of the subject *Johnny* will go to the bathroom. The latter reading may be seen as a metonymy where *going to the bathroom* stands for ‘being allowed to go to the bathroom’. The infinitive highlights the intended pragmatic effect of such an act of permission, which itself is not expressed in the sentence. In other words, the interpretation of this sentence involves the metonymy ACTION FOR PRECONDITION OF ACTION, more specifically, PRAGMATIC EFFECT OF SPEECH ACT FOR SPEECH ACT.

As another example, consider Nikiforidou’s (1999: 143) observation that there is a systematic ambiguity in the interpretation of nominalizations in English. For example, *performance* may denote an action (e.g. *The performance lasted for two hours*), a manner (e.g. *The performance was impressive*) or a result (e.g. *The performance is available on CD*).

On the diachronic level, metonymy plays a crucial role in grammaticalization processes (see Traugott and König 1991, Hopper and Traugott 1993, Heine, Claudi, and Hünnemeyer 1991). For example, the lexical item *go* in the phrase *be going to* has grammaticalized into a future

marker, which in colloquial English has undergone further phonological attrition to the contracted form *be gonna*. This change is based on a strong experiential correlation between goal-oriented motion and purposeful action (that is by definition future-oriented) as in *I am going to the library*.

3.3 Metonymy and speech acts

In section 1 it was pointed out that metonymy has other than purely referential functions. In analogy to the three pragmatic functions that are familiar from speech act theory (cf. Searle 1969), one may divide metonymies into the following three types: (i) referential metonymy, (ii) predication metonymy, and (iii) illocutionary metonymy (see Thornburg and Panther 1997, Panther and Thornburg 1998).

Referential metonymy is a means of indirect reference. An example of such a metonymy is the use of *subway* in *The subway is on strike* as an indirect reference to the subway personnel.

Predicational metonymy is exemplified by utterances such as *The saxophone player had to leave early*, which, in many contexts, metonymically induces the interpretation ‘The saxophone player left early’. In this case, a past obligation to leave early, predicated of the referring expression *the saxophone player*, is interpreted as an actually occurring past action. This case instantiates a large class of phenomena involving a generic metonymy in which a potential event stands for an actual event.

Illocutionary metonymy is illustrated by utterances such as *Can you lend me your sweater?* As Gibbs (1994, 1999), Thornburg and Panther (1997), and Panther and Thornburg (1998) have argued, illocutionary acts, especially indirect ones (see Searle 1975), can be analyzed in terms of conceptual frames, scenes, idealized cognitive models, scenarios, and the like. A component of a speech act scenario that is sufficiently salient can evoke other components of the scenario and thereby metonymically stand for the scenario as a whole. The basic idea is that an attribute (or in Searle’s terminology, a felicity condition) of a speech act can stand for the speech act itself, in the same way that an attribute of a person can stand for the person. Thus the above-mentioned utterance literally asks about the ability of the hearer to lend the speaker his sweater, which is then interpreted as an attribute of the request scenario, or in Searle’s terms, a preparatory condition of the request. The metonymy involved might be called PRECONDITION FOR ACTION.

3.4 Metonymies across languages

So far relatively little work has been done on how metonymies are exploited across languages. Preliminary research points to important cross-linguistic differences in the use of metonymy.

Brdar and Brdar-Szabó (2003) show that the MANNER FOR (LINGUISTIC) ACTION metonymy is much more systematically exploited in English than in Croatian and Hungarian, where the linguistic action is usually coded in the verb. Thus English allows a sentence such as *I must be open with her*, where only the manner in which the speech act is performed is indicated, leaving it up to the hearer to metonymically infer the linguistic action itself. In contrast, in Hungarian the same content is rendered as *Nyíltan kell vele beszélnem* ‘I must speak openly with her’. A literal translation of the English sentence **Nyíltnak kell vele lennem* is unacceptable in Hungarian.

Panther and Thornburg (1999) have conducted a comparative study of English and Hungarian in which they demonstrate that the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY metonymy is exploited more extensively in English than in Hungarian. For example, in the domain of perception, the metonymy is systematically used in English but blocked in Hungarian. Thus English *Can you see him* for 'Do you see him' contrasts with Hungarian *Látod?* 'Do you see him?' In another comparative study, based on parallel text corpora, Panther and Thornburg (2003b) show that English makes more extended use of two related metonymic principles than French: THE ONSET FOR THE WHOLE EVENT metonymy and THE INCIPIENT PHASE FOR THE WHOLE EVENT metonymy, where 'onset' refers to the starting point and 'incipient phase' to the initial time span of an event. An example of the contrasting use of the latter metonymy is seen in a sentence from André Gide's novel *L'immoraliste* and its English translation: *Puis il plut* 'Then it rained' (coding of whole event) vs. *Then it began to rain* (coding of incipient phase metonymically evoking whole event).

3.5 Metonymy and language comprehension

Metonymic processes play an important part in utterance interpretation. For example, Gibbs (1994: 345ff., 1999: 73) adduces experimental evidence that people interpret colloquial tautologies, such as *Boys will be boys*, on the basis of shared metonymic models. Pragmatically, tautologies flout Grice's maxim of Quantity because they are literally not informative. However, people do not readily accept uninformative utterances and will therefore resort to some other interpretation. In the example given above, the category BOY might be understood in terms of salient stereotypical attributes of boys such as 'unruly or rowdy behavior'. Tautologies involving categories that are not associated with stereotypical conceptual frames are much harder to process metonymically. Thus in a tautological statement such as *Telephones will be telephones*, the category TELEPHONE hardly evokes any kind of stereotypical knowledge and the tautology will therefore be hard to make sense of.

4 Areas of future research

Many aspects of metonymy are still unknown. Some of the questions that await solutions are: What are the discourse functions of metonymy? What are the constraints on the production of metonymy? Are there conceptual metonymies that have the status of universals? Can languages be typologically classified according to the metonymies they do or do not exploit? How do these typologies compare with the more traditional morpho-syntactic typologies? Only the first two issues can be gone into below:

4.1 Discourse functions of metonymy

The function of metonymy in discourse and its contextual effects have been little researched. Why should speakers use metonymies at all when they could just as well employ non-metonymic means of referring, predicating and performing illocutionary acts? Papafragou (1996) sees two communicative reasons for using metonymy: (i) The extra processing effort caused by a metonymy is offset by a gain in contextual effects (additional implicatures); (ii) the processing effort may be smaller than that for a literal expression of the metonymic sense. The latter case (ii) occurs quite frequently in the setting of routinized communicative interaction, e.g. at work: In a restaurant where the waitresses do not know the names of customers they commonly refer to a customer or group of customers as *table five*, etc. In the given context, this is the most economical way of referring to otherwise unknown individuals. As an example of contextual gains consider the sentence *Now it **can** happen* uttered by Richard Williams, father of the tennis-playing sisters Venus and Serena Williams

when they reached the final of the U.S. Open tennis tournament in 2001. Why would the speaker choose the modal *can* in a situation where he *knows* that his daughters *will be* the finalists in the tennis tournament? The reason may be that the source concept (POTENTIALITY) has—in the given situation—more contextual effects than the target concept (FUTURE ACTUALITY). The greater cognitive effort resulting from the metonymic coding of the utterance is largely offset by the richness of conceptual information that it evokes. The potentiality modal *can* and the time adverbial *now* convey pragmatic implications of “obstacles” that have been “removed” by strenuous efforts; such connotations are not conveyed by the predictive modal *will*.

In an important study on the conversational function of indirect speech acts, Gibbs (1994: 351ff.) argues that conventional indirect requests such as *Can/will you lend me your sweater?* or *Would you mind lending me your sweater?* are not just random substitute forms for the direct request *Lend me your sweater*. The source expression is not arbitrarily chosen but its selection is motivated by the addressee’s intention to address potential “obstacles” to the satisfaction of the request. Gibbs’ work shows that the meaning of the source expression is relevant to the interpretation process as a whole, thus providing strong evidence against the view that a source expression merely stands for a target.

In a similar vein, Song (1997) shows that metonymies with the same target but different source domains yield different contextual effects and can therefore not be regarded as discourse-pragmatically equivalent. For example, in Japanese the two utterances *konogoro kuruma-ni notte-inai* ‘I have not ridden wheels recently’ and *konogoro handoru-wo nigitte-inai* ‘I have not held a steering wheel recently’ conventionally stand for ‘I have not driven a car recently’. According to Song (1997: 102) “the hold-a-steering-wheel metonymy highlights the controlling aspect while the ride-on-wheels metonymy highlights mobility.” The two metonymies are thus appropriate in different contexts. Song points out that the latter metonymy has a much wider distribution than the former, which is typically used in situations where the ability to control the car is foregrounded.

4.2 Constraints on the use of metonymy

The characterization of metonymy as a contiguity relation or as a process whereby a source concept provides mental access to a target concept is probably too general. As a first constraint, consider contents that are entailed or presupposed by a “source” meaning. Entailed or presupposed contents are surely mentally accessible “targets”. Nevertheless, one would not want to regard such meanings as metonymic. The expression *X manages to do Y* entails ‘X does Y’ and presupposes, in its basic sense, ‘X tries to do Y’, but it is counterintuitive to postulate metonymies such as MANAGING FOR DOING or MANAGING FOR TRYING. Similarly, in the sentence *The loss of her diamond ring chagrined Mary*, the concept LOSS provides mental access to the concept NON-POSSESSION. However, *loss* does not metonymically stand for ‘non-possession’.

Second, there are also restrictions on what everybody considers to be genuine cases of metonymy, such as the stand-for relation between *She is just a pretty face* and ‘she is a pretty person’, which was briefly discussed in Section 1. Without restricting its application, we could use the PART-FOR-WHOLE metonymy with other contiguous body-part relations as well, such as *What a pretty mouth* to mean ‘what a pretty face’ or even ‘what a pretty person’. Not all elements of a conceptual frame may serve as metonymic sources or targets. For example, the concept TRUMPET provides mental access to the concepts TRUMPET PLAYER, TRUMPET

SOUND, ORCHESTRA, BRASS INSTRUMENT, etc. TRUMPET PLAYER and TRUMPET SOUND can become metonymic targets in sentences like *The trumpet is on sick leave* and *The trumpet is heard all over Kraków*, respectively. ORCHESTRA or MUSICAL INSTRUMENT, however, cannot become metonymic targets although the metonymy MEMBER OF A CATEGORY FOR THE CATEGORY is available, as in the use of *aspirin* for ‘any pain relieving tablet’ (Radden and Kövecses 1999: 34). Apparently, trumpets are not felt to be central enough to stand as members for a collection or a category. More prototypical members such as a violin are more suitable for that purpose. As stated by Norrick (1981: 35), “A single violin may stand for the class of violins, that of bowed instruments, that of string instruments or even of instruments generally.” Similarly, the metonymy in *We need some young brains on our faculty* is well-motivated because it exploits the established conceptual metonymy BODY PART FOR PERSON. The brain is a salient body part, and the conceptual distance between BRAIN and PERSON is small. The metonymy in *The kneecap left the pitch*, by contrast, is less motivated because a knee-cap is a non-salient body part and the conceptual distance between KNEE-CAP and PERSON is large.

To conclude, there appears to be a bundle of motivating factors involved in licensing or constraining metonymy universally and in particular languages. These factors include conceptual restrictions, cultural entrenchment, salience and prototypicality of metonymic source, conceptual distance between source and target, and probably other parameters.

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