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editors and language teachers**

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**“Metonymic Processing: A Cognitive Ability Relevant to Translators, Editors and Language Teachers”**

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Abstract

*‘Metonymic processing’, the ability to recognize relatedness through shared features, associations or part-whole relations, is a basic cognitive ability, which can be listed along with other abilities, such as matching, selecting, ordering and recombining. The ability to use language communicatively relies heavily on the ability to recognise metonymic relations at word level, but also at sentence and discourse level. This paper proposes a ‘general theory’ of metonymy, showing the commonality among diverse linguistic phenomena. It is suggested that, because metonymic processing is basic to language processing, an awareness of it can contribute to the training of translators, editors and language teachers.*

Key words: metonymy, relatedness, language processing, language learning, translation

## **1 Engaging with Metaphor**

My topic is metonymy, the recognition of part-whole relatedness between things, words and concepts, in other words, between signs and parts of signs. As this might initially seem an odd choice of topic, I will start by giving an explanation of how I came to be researching in this area, and why I am speaking at a psycholinguistics conference in Bari, rather than a conference in another field elsewhere.

I am going to do this through a personal narrative, starting with work I was doing some years ago as a compiler on an Italian-English dictionary for the UK publisher Longman. At one point in this work I was working on a run in letter G and kept encountering words which had two senses. Many words in this run had just one sense, occasionally there was a highly polysemous word with many senses, but there were also a lot of words with two senses, one a physical concrete sense, the other a metaphorical extension of it, such as: *grasp* – you can have a physical grasp or a mental grasp of something; or *gutted* – you can gut a fish or be gutted emotionally. It seemed to me that there was ‘reality’, and then a system of signs representing that reality, but then a further metaphoric level, a sort of ‘parallel universe’, on and above that. Also, at the time, I was puzzled to know how it was that language succeeds in being so subtle and nuanced, and so fit for its communicative purpose, considering the finite resources available to the speaker. It seemed to me the models I had encountered until then – especially those concerned with syntax, heads and modifiers, and truth conditions – were rather crude and mechanistic, and did not really explain this flexibility sufficiently.

My intuition led to me metaphor. I started reading the literature on metaphor and found it to be both extensive and multi-disciplinary. Nowadays being multi-disciplinary is rather expected of one (rather like being politically correct), but the literature on metaphor is truly multi-disciplinary, ranging from poetics, semantics and pragmatics, to psycholinguistics, computational linguistics, discourse analysis, and, significantly, cognitive linguistics. A whole branch of scholarship has grown from Lakoff & Johnson's inspiring and seminal work of 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, in which metaphor is presented as a 'thought' phenomenon rather than just a 'text' phenomenon (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They claim we operate, 'live', by reference to conceptual metaphors like GOOD IS UP, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and that these 'pattern' conventional language in the mental lexicon (as well as novel utterances). What is more, Lakoff & Johnson see metaphor as grounded in physical reality, an embodiment of our experience of the physical world (not detached from it), constantly reinforced by our interactions with it, as laid out in their 'Neural Theory of Language' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

This essentially was where my reading and thinking had taken me four or so years ago, but then it started to occur to me that something more fundamental was going on, and that that something was 'metonymy': the recognition of part-whole relatedness between things, words and concepts (ie between signs or parts of signs). Metonymy seemed to me to be involved in a whole range of phenomena as diverse as: describing events, understanding indirect speech acts and structuring discourse; naming people/things, being persuasive, doing puzzles (like Sudoku), making jokes (especially involving word play and puns) and being entertained by lookalikes and impersonators. This led me to develop a 'general' theory of metonymy, that is, a theory which broadens out the concept of metonymy beyond the areas in which it is normally considered. Ideas from this general theory of metonymy are presented in the remainder of this talk.

## 2 Moving into Metonymy

Metonymy is involved in the language system in a very basic way. Even in going from the language system as it is stored in our memories to actual utterances, we make use of metonymy, because our utterances are just a partial version of the full meaning of the words we use. This is the first part of the entry for *door* in the third edition of *Webster's International Dictionary*:

DOOR ... a movable piece of firm material or structure supported usu. along one side and swinging on pivots or hinges, sliding along a groove, rolling up and down, revolving as one of four leaves, or folding like an accordion by means of which an opening may be closed or kept open for passage into or out of a building, room or other covered enclosure or a car, airplane, elevator or other vehicle ... (Hanks, 1979:32)

This definition is elaborate, almost verging on the comical, and yet there is still much more to say about *door*, such as the material the *door* might be made of and the connotations of *door*. It shows how 'big' the sense of *door* is and how hard it is to pin down. Using a word involves excluding certain aspects (often many aspects) of the full meaning while retaining others. There is a narrowing from the general sense to the

specific reference, from what Frege classically called ‘Sinn’ (‘sense’) to ‘Bedeutung’ (‘reference’) (Frege 1960 [1892]). This narrowing also occurs when we combine words. If we take the word *red*, for example, and combine it with nouns such as *carpet*, *lorry* and *apple*, in each case, *red carpet*, *red lorry*, *red apple*, a different quality of red is intended and understood. So, even when we are dealing with literal language a metonymic process is involved.

Another common phenomenon involving metonymy is fixed phrases, classics like *The White House* for ‘the US government’, or *Buckingham Palace* for ‘the British royal family’, but also everyday expressions such as *to pay with plastic* (credit card), *the small screen* (television), *to go for a bite* (go for a meal), *a roof over your head* (a home), *the hole in the wall* (cash machine/ATM), *to head for the door*, *bums on seats*, *a scratch card*, *a smoothie*, *bubbly*. In all these, a part (a physical part or an attribute) is standing for the whole, there being more to a credit card than being made of plastic, more to a home than its roof, and so on. (It should be added that we do not necessarily need to make a connection between parts and wholes when processing these particular examples, as they are conventional expressions, and will usually simply be retrieved from the mental lexicon whole, as ready-made signs. I have given them here as examples in order to help make the argument easy to follow.) Another common use of metonymy is in naming specific objects, such as shops and publications, eg a hairdresser’s called *Scissors*, the property supplement to the Times called *Bricks and Mortar*, a magazine on wine called *Decanter*, the pharmacy section in a supermarket called *Aches and Pains*.

Another way in which metonymy is commonly used in everyday interaction is in identifying specific individuals, especially when their names are not known or not salient. The individual is represented by a single characteristic, one which pertains to that person in a particular situation (rather than being a permanent or defining feature). Croft & Cruse call these ‘extrinsic metonymies’ (Croft & Cruse, 2004:217). The most famous metonymy in the metonymy literature is in this category: “Ham sandwich is waiting for his check.” This is ‘restaurant talk’, where the food a customer orders becomes a salient feature and the one used to identify them. This is also a phenomenon in ‘hotel talk’, eg “Room 47 hasn’t had her dry cleaning yet”, or ‘hospital talk’, eg “The appendectomy is in theatre”. A proper name is not actually very important here, or even useful, for the restaurant, hotel or hospital staff.

But more interesting than all this, to my mind, is the use of metonymy to give nuance. Metonymy is a very useful tool for expressing shades of meaning. It can be used to highlight a particular aspect of an event. Radden gives the example of DRIVING, comparing “I have been sitting behind the wheel all day” with “I was sixteen when I first had wheels” (Radden, 2008). Both expressions ‘mean’ DRIVING, but “sitting behind the wheel” emphasizes the monotony of driving, while “having wheels” emphasizes the freedom of driving. Radden calls these ‘event metonymies’, emphasizing the use of metonymy in describing an action/event, rather than just referring to an entity (Radden, 2008).

Critical discourse analysts have long been interested in the subtle encoding of meaning, especially ideological meaning, through lexical choice. Though they would not use the

term ‘metonymy’ in their discussions, they are essentially comparing referential and event metonymies of the sort Radden discusses. Hodge & Kress report a comparison undertaken by a journalist of the ‘spin’ given by the Western press to reporting of the First Gulf War: UK activities tended to be reported using words like *reporting guidelines, press briefings, collateral damage, confident, freedomfighter ...*; while Iraqi activities were reported with words like *censorship, propaganda, civilian casualties, desperate, terrorist ...* (Hodge and Kress, 1993:162). This, for me, starts to offer something of an explanation of the question posed at the beginning of this talk, suggesting where we should look to explain the flexibility of language and its subtlety.

### 3 Language Learning, Editing and Translation

In this section of this talk, I move on to discuss metonymy in applied language contexts: language learning, editing and translation. To explain the role metonymy plays in learner communication, I start by introducing the concept of ‘metonymic processing’, the use of metonymy in processing language. Let me propose a hypothetical situation to illustrate this concept: imagine you are on a trip to Budapest, Hungary, and on arrival you take a taxi from the airport to your hotel. If we imagine the conversation to be in English, your English and the driver’s English will probably be very different. The conversation would probably involve a lot of effortful processing. It would be ‘hard work’ on many levels: there will be differences at the level of phonology, syntax and semantics, at the level of pragmatics, discourse and genre; and at the level of cognitive frames, conceptual metaphors and social practices. There will be a difference between what you expect to hear and what you actually hear. It is through ‘metonymic processing’ that we compensate for this difference, that is, by identifying relatedness between the utterance you expect and the utterance you hear.

Another example: if someone were to say “What are you doing?”, pronounced in this way, /wɒt ju do in/, I would experience the utterance as different from my variety of English in a number of ways: a different stress pattern (‘syllable timed’ rather than ‘stress timing’, eg /wɒt ju du ŋ/), and differences in the positioning of the vowels and the placing of the consonants. But these differences would not be so great that I would not understand what is being said. Communication breaks down only when metonymic links are stretched too far, when there is not enough ‘overlap’ between the heard and the expected, when relatedness between the two ‘versions’ can no longer be identified.

Let me give a further example. This is from data I collected from an informant Zoe, in which she is talking about social change:

English has become more simple / they are not really full decorative embellished sentences / well structured sentences // they are short sentences / just swift to send them away / even in staccato language // and I think it has becomes more / because of the Americanisms / in our language / in English

In one sense, this speech event makes little sense; in another sense, it makes complete sense. I feel we should see learner utterances as neither ‘correct’ nor ‘incorrect’, but

somewhere in between, attempts at meaning making which take place in real time and under social pressure and which vary in their success, no different really from any speech event, whatever the competence of the speaker or whether learners or native speakers are involved.

There are other skills involving metonymy which the people learners speak to (their interlocutors) need to have in their repertoires. One of those is the ability to use (what the creolist Ferguson was first to call) ‘foreigner talk’, that is the use of a modified form of a language, used by proficient speakers when speaking to learners, and characterized by:

less syntactic complexity, fewer pronouns, the use of higher frequency vocabulary, more clearly articulated pronunciation (to the extent of unnaturalness, for example, by the avoidance of contractions and weak forms), slower speech rate, more questions (often for the purpose of checking understanding), as well as the tendency to speak more loudly and to repeat (Jenkins, 2000:177)

The relationship between foreigner talk and unaccommodated talk is metonymic, so is the relationship between languages, varieties of a language, registers, dialects, sociolects and idiolects. What editors do in the course of their work is to create versions of the same texts which are metonymically related to each other. Translators and interpreters are also constantly exploring the metonymic relations between words and strings of words, but between two different languages. Italian and English, for example, do not correspond exactly in the word categories they employ, the syntax they use their phraseology or their pragmatics, so a translation is never entirely ‘literal’. Neither is the relationship between an original (‘source text’) and a translation (‘target text’) metaphorical (or at least very rarely). Instead, translators and interpreters are working in the area of close-relatedness, where equivalences are ‘fuzzy’ rather than sharp.

Going back to language learners, we have said that metonymy plays a role in the accommodation interlocutors need to make in order to understand learners and be understood by them; it also plays an important role when learners produce speech. What it allows them to do is to exploit the information they already have in the mental lexicon more fully. Meaning making is in its nature partial, language having a very ‘loose fit’ around reality. The consequence of this is that we only need to refer to a ‘part’ (or one aspect) in order to communicate the ‘whole’. Communication achieves far more flexibility than any determinist model of language, ie one in which there is a fixed one-to-one correspondence between words and things, would suggest, as meaning can be ‘got at’ in many different ways. These are data from my informant Zoe again:

the world has becoming more and more in speed / more speedful // and more superficial // because no inner characters are more admired / but more superficial things / the outer looking / how you look / how you react yourself / how you cope by not being a character

We have here a creative, expressive and fluent speech event, which cleverly exploits the resources the speaker has at her disposal. She uses metonymic associations to reach her

communicative goals. The expressions *more in speed, speedful, inner characters, outer looking, react yourself, being a character* all 'do the job' but do it unconventionally. We are left with the impression of a speaker determined to express herself in a second language and doing so successfully.

What I have tried to do in this presentation is to suggest that the ability to recognise relatedness between things, words and concepts, between signs and parts of signs, is a fundamental processing skill, which is either covertly or overtly behind all our linguistic activities. I have also tried to show that it is a psycholinguistic approach which has allowed us this insight, to see commonality among a whole range of diverse linguistic phenomena not normally discussed together.

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