

Conventions and Metaphors: Norms and Exploitations

Patrick Hanks

Faculty of Informatics, Masaryk University, Brno

Riga: day 5

30 November, 2007

Outline

- Criteria for deciding whether a word or phrase has literal or metaphorical status?
 - Study extracts from real text, not invented examples
- What is the semantic relationship between literal and metaphorical meanings?
- What is normal usage? How is normal usage exploited in unusual ways?
 - Similes offer more potential for dynamic, creative use of language than metaphors.

The need for syntagmatic criteria

- “In spite of some attempts in computational linguistics to detect metaphors in running texts, no corpus manager disposes of a "Show all metaphors" function.” -- Lönneker and Alonge
- If syntagmatic criteria for any X can be given, a corpus manager will find all X.
- Can syntagmatic criteria for “all metaphors” be identified?

What is a metaphor? (1)

From G. Greene (1973), *The Honorary Consul*:

- The **line** of smoke which, when he arrived here first, had not yet been **hung out** along the horizon. -- p. 1.
- He **underlined** the adjective in a tone of embittered denigration. -- p. 12.
- The heavy **thunder** of a plane which was making a slow turn overhead. -- p. 17
 - Are the following metaphorical or literal?
- He ... chose to **face** alone the daily increasing dangers. p. 2.
- His sexual feeling was **anaesthetized** by anxiety. p. 9

What is a metaphor? (2)

Figurative language is more common in fiction and poetry, but metaphors may also occur in non-fiction:

- “The Internet is an electronic, global, and interactive medium ... The most fundamental influence arises out of the electronic character of the channel.” -- D. Crystal (2001), *Language and the Internet*. CUP, p. 24
 - Are these uses of *arise* (v.) and *channel* (n.) metaphorical or literal?

What is a metaphor? (3)

- Sometimes, there are syntagmatic clues to metaphoricity (Hanks in IJL 2004):
 - rivers of blood, a torrent of abuse, a storm of protest, a storm of feathers. (BNC)
 - the River Wye became a torrent. (BNC)

BUT:

- Society is a sea; a poem is a pheasant. – Wallace Stevens
 - No syntagmatic clues here

The insufficiency of syntagmatics

- Metaphors depend on literal truth, not syntagmatics.
- “All metaphors are false, like lies”
-- Donald Davidson.
- “Society is a sea”, “A poem is a pheasant”
But society is not a sea, a poem is not a pheasant.

Resonance

- If a word or phrase has both a concrete and an abstract meaning, the abstract may resonate with the concrete, but not vice versa. Thus:
 - **A.** A car in the street outside her hotel coughed and choked and **backfired**.
 - **B.** Bernard's plan **backfired**.
- B can resonate with A, but not vice versa

Even though sense B of *backfire* is 20x more common than A.

Resonance Quotient

- A *resonant expression* is one whose meaning has potential resonance with a *literal* meaning of the same word or phrase.
- The *resonance quotient* (RQ) of a text can be measured by dividing the number of words in the text by the number of resonant expressions.

Similes and Sets

Hope creaked in his throat like a piece of rusty machinery

He ... lay looking at the telephone as though it were a black and venomous object which would certainly strike again.

- Hope is not a piece of machinery; a telephone is not a venomous object.

COMPARE:

It [his habit of not touching people] was a sign, **like** his English passport, that he would always remain a stranger.

It sounded very low, **as though** it had lifted off the ground a few minutes before.

- His English passport *was* such a sign; the plane *had* just taken off.

Metaphor is a contrastive notion

- There can be no metaphors if there are no literal meanings.
- There can be no literal meanings if there are no metaphors.

Dynamic vs. conventional metaphor

- Dynamic metaphors – freshly coined
 - *Society is a sea.*
 - *A poem is a pheasant.*
- Conventional metaphors
 - *keeping one's head above water ...*
 - Conventional metaphors are conventions of the language. They belong in dictionaries.
 - Dynamic, newly coined metaphors don't.

Criteria for literalness

- Is the most frequent sense necessarily literal?
 - No! consider *backfire*.
- Historical priority?
 - No! consider *awful, ardent, literal, camera*.
- Concrete, not abstract?
 - Yes – if there is a concrete sense (but cf. *idea*).
 - A word can have two or more literal senses (with no resonance between them): cf. *subject, object*.
- Absence of resonance?
 - a property of literalness, rather than a criterion for it

Metaphors that should be in dictionaries (examples)

- Peter Radford yesterday **fired the first shots** in a power struggle for control of British athletics.
 - Conventional (5 similar examples in BNC)
 - The first week of February had barely passed when Doctor Staples **fired a warning shot across his bows**.
 - All 7 uses of this phrase in BNC are metaphorical. Literal uses are, it seems, archaic.
 - Much variation in wording. Deciding the ‘canonical form’ of the idiom will be difficult.
- BUT NOT: She **fired an opening smile** across Celia’s desk.
- A dynamic metaphor -- an exploitation of a norm

Conventional metaphors as secondary senses

- the terrible garbage written about him
- pressure to resign
- bringing the affair to light
- The story snowballed
- ... fast-tracked a visa application
- ... bring the world down on my head
- He hit out at the “lies” that had been printed about him
- ... paid tribute to his ex-wife
- ... the collapse of their marriage
- the vitriol that has been poured upon me

Other kinds of resonance

- “Sleeping with the enemy, he fell among the most frivolous rightwing effete scoundrels of the Westminster political scene” (Toynbee, 16.12.2004)
 - 1991 film (Julia Roberts) about a murderous relationship.
 - “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” (Luke 10: 30)

Word meaning is not always specific

“Sleeping with the enemy, he fell among the most frivolous rightwing effete scoundrels of the Westminster political scene” (Toynbee)

- *effete* > L *effetus* ‘worn out with childbearing’. Toynbee can’t have intended this particular resonance – the sense is obsolete (never made it from Latin to English).
- So what is the literal meaning of *effete*? NODE says “affected, over-refined, and ineffectual.”
- But here it seems to be little more than just a general insult.

Is resonance only dynamic?

- Both dynamic and conventional metaphors resonate:
- *Society is a sea* (dynamic)
 - In what respect? [many possible answers]
- *It is good to see that the railway is keeping its head above water* (conventional)
 - In what respect? [easier to answer]

The reader often has to work harder to get the resonance of a dynamic metaphor.

Conventional metaphors

High-frequency conventional metaphors

- appeal to a cognitively salient property
 - The hardness of *iron*
 - The coldness of *ice*
 - The brightness of the *sun*
 - The vastness of the *sea*
 - The barrenness of a *desert*
 - The confusion of a *jungle*

Convention and reality

- What is an *oasis* really like?
- Acc. to Christiane Fellbaum (who's been to some), oases are :
 - noisy, smelly, crowded, busy, bustling,
 - full of honking lorries, shouting people, and stalling camels.
- But in (conventional) English ...

Salient collocates for 'oasis' (Wasps)

BNC freq for 'oasis': 327

Collocate	Co-occurrences	Salience score
desert	13	20.8
calm	7	14.1
greenery	3	9.6
welcome	4	7.9
green	4	6.6
tranquillity	2	6.0
peaceful	3	5.9
peace	3	5.9
pleasant	3	5.5

Beyond statistical significance

- Some other cognitively salient collocates of *oasis* (real, but not statistically salient):
 - *cool, lush, luxurious, pool, water, trees, palm trees*
- Over 40% of uses of *oasis* in BNC are figurative, i.e. they do not designate “a place in a desert where the water table approaches or reaches the ground surface” (*CED*).

A cline of metaphoricity

- An oasis in the Libyan desert (*literal*)
- seven antarctic oasis areas (*quasi literal*)
- An oasis of calm in the centre of Leeds
- an oasis of tranquillity (*figurative*)
- An oasis of common sense (*abstract*)

Some citations for ‘oasis’ (BNC)

- Stoke Mandeville station is a little **oasis**; clean and bright and friendly.
- New Town Hotel -- a relaxing **oasis** for professional and business men.
- She regards her job as an **oasis** in a desert of coping with Harry's lack of direction
- an **oasis** in the midst of this desert of feuding.
- Driffield, which was a pleasant **oasis** in the East Riding of Yorkshire
- The planned opencast site was a pleasant **oasis** in a decaying industrial landscape.

Teasing out salient properties (1)

- According to corpus evidence, an oasis is:
 - tranquil
 - good (positive vibes)
 - surrounded by desert [or city *qua* desert]
 - isolated

Some citations for 'jungle' (BNC)

- *the impression that accounts are a jungle into which the untutored layman should not venture*
- *... can eventually turn an organization into a jungle (if not a zoo).*
- *New York is a jungle, they tell you.*
- *the music business and see it for what it is, a jungle...*
- *[R. Branson] ... a predatory animal in the music business jungle ...*
- *the shallow artificiality of life in the concrete jungle, and*
- *the area is a far cry from the city's concrete jungle -- and therein lies the reason for its charm.*
- *...is thrusting deeper into the corporate jungle.*
- *In this hostile ideological jungle, little clearings of socialist culture ...*
- *In the media jungle, Murdoch and Maxwell grew to be elephants.*
- *... a seeker lost in the German metaphysical jungle*
- *hard to believe that an inhabitant of the political jungle can be nice;*
- *strolling unwittingly through a psychological jungle.*
- *no need to become trapped in a semantic jungle.*

Teasing out salient properties (2)

- Jungles are:
 - confusing
 - bad (negative vibes)
 - Full of dangerous creatures

Word meaning: a complex linguistic Gestalt (1)

- **oasis:**
 - Oases are conventionally regarded by English speakers as calm, peaceful, and pleasant places. The reality may be very different.
- **jungle:**
 - Jungles are conventionally regarded by English speakers as confusing, dangerous, and lawless places.
 - [IDIOM] The **law of the jungle** is a state of lawlessness in which power rather than the rule of law is the deciding factor: *World public opinion now realizes that the principles of international law, not the law of the jungle, must be respected.*

Similes

- All metaphors are false (like lies)
 - The speaker deliberately says something false, to alert the hearer to some salient property.
- All similes are trivially true ; everything is like everything else.
 - Donald Davidson (1978): *What Metaphors Mean*
 - Yes, but some things are more alike than others
 - And anyway, Davidson should have said “comparisons”. Similes are always false.

Conventional similes

- Appeal to salient properties, e.g.
 - *eyes like a hawk*
 - *run like a hare*

Definitions of *hawk*, *hare*, etc. must account for conventional similes

But the meaning is not always clear-cut:

- *treat someone like a dog*

Not an experiential gestalt

- The only sound in the room apart from a **demented** fly
- Howling like a **demented** banshee
- I look like a **demented** barber
- The idea of God pursuing a whole family like a **demented** genealogist
- My script looks like **demented** knitting
- A single woman in their midst acts like a **demented** lighthouse
- Thrashing plastic like a **demented** clock spring
- The paddle ... thrashing like a **demented** washing machine
- Rising and falling like a **demented** yo-yo

Similes and logical form

Syntactic displacement:

- He looked like a broiled frog, hunched over his desk, grinning and satisfied.
- The presence of a single woman in their midst acts like a demented lighthouse, enticing hapless men onto the rocks.

Definitions that fail to explain

dog: member of the species *Canis familiaris*, order Canidae.

spider: member of the order Arachnidae, class Aranea.

second: the duration of 9,192,631,770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium 133 atom.

Definitions such as these do little to explain the meaning and use of these ordinary English words.

What else should we say about *dog*?

As well as categorizing *dog* as *Canis familiaris*, a lexicographic account should indicate the following aspects of the linguistic Gestalt *dog*:

- There is a great variety of different breeds of dog
- Dogs bark, whine, and growl
 - Small dogs yap
- Dogs wag their tails when they are pleased
- Dogs have a highly developed sense of smell
- Dogs are kept as pets, trained as guards, as guides for blind people, to find things by smell, and for many other purposes
- Dogs are noted for their potential for aggression and their tenacity
- Dogs are typically loyal to their owners (even when badly treated)
- Dog owners take ‘the dog’ for a walk
 - on a leash/lead
- To *treat someone like a dog* means to treat them badly
- A *mad dog* is one with rabies and is extremely dangerous

A complex linguistic Gestalt (2)

- We might also mention that the symbiosis between humans and dogs is now thought by some anthropologists to be largely responsible for the evolutionary success of both species.
- Important to classify *dog* as a scientific natural-kind term, but also ...
- the meaning and use of a familiar word like *dog* also represents a complex linguistic gestalt, which plays a major role in our language (under-represented in dictionaries)

Terms of Art vs. Natural Terms

2 kinds of words (content words) must be recognized:

1. ‘terms of art’ (technical terms):

- CONCEPTS stipulatively defined: necessary conditions
- Sharp set boundaries between X and not-X.
- Examples: *mammal, vertebrate, oxygen*

2. ‘natural terms’:

- analogically defined by reference to ‘best examples’
- Fuzzy set boundaries
- Rich sources of metaphors and similes
- Examples: *animal, beast, jungle, oasis, air*

There is some tension and borrowing between them.

(*Animal* was once a term of art; *reptile* is both).

An Important Distinction

Distinguish between:

- Normal, conventional usage
 - The true concern of the lexicographer
- All possibilities of usage
 - Including examples invented by linguists

Few generative linguists make this distinction

Conclusions

- Syntagmatic criteria can be developed to find some but not all metaphors in a corpus
 - Extended conceptual metaphors are even harder to find.
- The distinction between conventional language (norms) and creative language (exploitations) is more important for linguistic theory than literal vs. metaphorical
- “like” exploits salient semantic properties of a word:
 - a) to establish ad-hoc categories (“*people like doctors and lawyers*”)
 - b) to create new perceptions by stimulating the imagination of the reader or hearer