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Teresa Dobrzyńska

Metaphor and Its Cultural Background

In his "Metaphor and Cultivation of Intimacy,"¹ Ted Cohen, making a plea for figuration and for its value which is independent of whether or not metaphor is attributed a capability of expressing true judgements, asks why people resort to communication through metaphor. The usual answer to this question is that metaphor is a means to express things which cannot be readily expressed in the cursory language. Metaphor enables a speaker to overcome the code's limited possibilities to articulate new ideas and notions, to "express what is inexpressible."² Other answers to the question mention the sensual power of metaphorical statements. Unlike speech which uses abstract notions, metaphorical statements are capable of conjuring up an image in the broadest sense of the word, for they conjure up visual, acoustic, tactile, olfactory, indeed gourmet sensations on perceiving the object referred to.

But Cohen suggested a different answer, pointing at pragmatical reasons. People tend to use metaphors, he said, essentially because metaphor enables the speaker and his partner to establish close contact. The addressee's reaction to a metaphorical statement is, in this interpretation, a response to the invitation to join the game which the metaphorical statement implies. Owing to that cooperation, Cohen argues, the sender and recipient of the message set up a close community, a circumstance which becomes particularly vivid in the

¹ *Critical Inquiry*, 5, Autumn 1978; [repr. in:] *On Metaphor*, ed. by S. Sacks. Chicago 1979.

² Cf. A. Paivio, "Psychological Processes in the Comprehension of Metaphor," [in:] *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. by A. Ortony. Cambridge 1979. p. 152.

case of metaphorical communication when the reception of the message is less automatic than otherwise and requires some effort at interpretation.

In Cohen's view, then, the purpose of using a metaphor is to create a sense of close community in communication. This is also its main value. But is it really necessary to resort to metaphor in order to achieve this? Wouldn't it do to use standard communication codes, without running the risk of potentially uncontrollable metaphorical interpretation, one in which the sender's intention may be missed? Indeed, is it necessary to use words at all? Wouldn't it do just to be together, as happens in a family, a social gathering, a religious congregation? I am not denying metaphor's cooperative nature, which has been outlined generally by H. P. Grice,³ but I wish to expound a view which differs from Cohen's and says that the closeness of sender and recipient is not the purpose but the condition of successful metaphorical communication. By closeness I mean similar personal experience as well as a related cultural background, implying familiarity with the same notions and a similar approach to them, which in turn implies a similar emotional attitude towards them.

To see to what extent closeness in this sense is a condition for a similar interpretation of a metaphor by the message's sender and recipient, let us stop for a while to take a close look at the mechanism of metaphor. Metaphor is one type of language use which only indirectly relies on the conventional meaning of coded signs. Metaphorical communication occurs when the recipient actively joins the process which makes him draw conclusions both from the message itself and from the situation in which it is uttered, as well as from all the relevant nonlinguistic knowledge. Metaphor differs from other types of figurative language use in that it is applied in a predicate function. The reference of a metaphorical expression is known by the context or situation in which it is used. Accordingly, metaphor can be phrased as a sentence. It is a sentence in which the predicate is filled with no ready-made contents but constitutes an interpretative task for the recipient. In a most general description, then, the structure of metaphor can be presented by these sentence patterns;

³ Cf. H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," [in:] *The Logic of Grammar*, ed. by D. Davidson, G. Harman, Dickenson 1975.

X is so and so; *X* is ... The site of the predicate in a metaphor is not empty, but it is not filled with any concrete contents—the given expression's coded meaning—either. (In the former case, there would be no way to control possibilities to fill that site, while the latter case is an ordinary case of coded communication.) In a metaphor, that site is filled by an element which indirectly leads a recipient towards the intended meaning but which at the same time does not hand together with the remaining part of the message or has no meaningful link to the given situation. Since a metaphorical predicate is referred to a given object of a different order, because in normal usage the predicate is not suitable for that object, a metaphor which has not been interpreted can be regarded as a meaningless utterance. The irrelevance of the metaphorical predicate (in a given interpretation) can be presented using contrasted symbols: object *X* will be described using predicates belonging to the order *Y* of things. Ultimately, depending on the syntactical structure of metaphorical statements, metaphor represents surface structures of the patterns: *X* is *Y*; *X* is *Y*-like; *X* *Y*s (as verb); *Y*... (said about *X*), and so on. The predicative element in a metaphor is sometimes called (following Richards) "vehicle"⁴ or (following Black) metaphor's "subsidiary subject."⁵

The metaphorical vehicle (let us keep to this fairly widespread designation of the metaphorical predicate) is used in a given metaphorical statement deliberately, for although its coded meaning is irrelevant in the given situation, it is the vehicle which leads the recipient towards the meaning the sender has in mind. The metaphor's final meaning is built of part of the meaning and/or the connotation of the vehicle, and the meaning is composed of those semantic and connotative elements which are suitable in the given situation, fitting the given reference.

The usage and understanding of metaphor, then, are conditional on understanding the meaning of the given sign in its expanded form, along with its pertinent connotations. Now this term, which is being used in different meanings in linguistic studies, calls for an

⁴ Cf. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Oxford 1936.

⁵ Cf. M. Black, "Metaphor," [in:] *Models and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press. 1962.

accurate definition here. I am using it in the meaning given to it by Iordanskaia and Melchuk,⁶ who described connotations of a given lexem as the set of features the speakers attribute to that lexem's denotate and which are not comprised by the invariant meaning; along with the invariant meaning, that set of features constitutes an extended characteristic of a definite lexical unit and is associated with it in people's minds. Many students of language called for including connotations, in this sense, in entries of dictionaries.⁷ Iordanskaia and Melchuk, who devoted a special study to it, showed that connotations are linked not so much with things as such but with the corresponding lexems. Accordingly, different designations of one and the same thing may have different connotations; the Russian *osel* (ass), for example, has connotations of "stupidly stubborn" while the lexem *ishak* which denotes the same beast connotes the feature "hard-working." The afore-mentioned authors pointed out that the connotations of the word embrace characteristics of things and processes which are not always confirmed in reality, for they are certain stereotypes about objects covered by a given term rather than being palpable features of any given object. Not each individual ass is stubborn or stupid, but this circumstance will hardly affect the stereotype of the ass or its connotations.

Iordanskaia and Melchuk made the important point that among linguistic connotations there are some that leave a trace in the given language's derivative and phraseological system. Features connoted by the formative foundation of the word are implicit in the invariant meaning of the derivative (e.g., the word *wiatr*, "wind," connotes changeability, which reaffirms the meaning of the Polish word *wietrzni-ca*, "giddy-head," for which changeability is a feature by definition); connotations of one word change into a semantic feature of the phrase which includes this word (e.g., the word *bone—dry as a bone*). Metaphorical utterances which have established themselves as linguistic conventions bear out by their meanings the existence of a certain connotation in the same word in the basic meaning (e.g., the word

⁶ Cf. L. N. Iordanskaia, I. A. Melchuk, "Konnotatsia v lingvisticheskoi semantike," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 6, 1980.

⁷ Cf., e.g., Y. D. Apresian, *Leksicheskaia semantika. Sinonimicheskie sredstvaazyka*. Moskwa 1974.

osel— as a species— connotes “stupidly stubborn,” which develops into a metaphor established as a linguistic convention: *osel*— “stupidly stubborn man”). All these connotations, which have their counterparts in semantic features of other words or derivative expressions, were called “lexical connotations” by Jordanskaia and Melchuk. The other connotations, the status of which is less objective as not confirmed in the language itself, were called “encyclopaedic connotations.” They are recorded in people’s memories as chains of associations linked with individual notions and corresponding expressions. They make up what is called “knowledge of the world,” embracing various beliefs and opinions which are not necessarily true but which are largely shared by members of the given community. That, as authors of studies on the interpretation of texts are fond of saying, is the “common world” of the given group of speakers. The range and shape of that world are determined both by psychophysical factors which are common to all people as specimens of one species (whose basic existential experience is largely the same) and the specific cultural experience of the given group. Within this latter kind of experience, participation in the reception of texts produced by the given culture and absorbed by a large proportion of society is one of the most important factors.

The associative features of words presented generally here— their connotations— are used in metaphorical statements to obtain certain occasional meanings. As said before, a metaphorical statement makes room for producing a new meaning, which does not yet exist in the language as a separate notion. That meaning is built anew each time when the utterance is being submitted to interpretation (with conventionalized metaphors being the one exception). The material used to create the metaphorical meaning are some (not all) of a word’s semantic features along with the above-mentioned connotative features of words. To forestall confusing this process of interpretation from objective invariant meanings coded in a language, I am going to speak about the interpretation (as distinct from the meaning) of metaphorical statements. A metaphorical interpretation manifests itself through a certain hypothetical set of features selected from the word’s semantic and connotative features which are suitable in the given reference. The set’s boundaries are actually open. In order to interpret the metaphor, it is necessary to think at least of one feature

picked from a number of possible features. But metaphors in poetic texts are as a rule designed to cause a much broader resonance among the audience, a resonance which is based on long series of connoted features. Interpretation of those metaphors may change depending on the person involved, but on the whole it is determined by the word's connotative potential.

To clarify a bit the above interpretation of metaphors, let me describe interpretative operations in the case of metaphorical utterance I presented in previous studies,⁸ using the possibly simplest terms. I take the sentence pattern "*X is Y*" as the formula representing all types of metaphor. The sentence represented by this formula is incomprehensible in its literal meaning, and may be recognized as a metaphorical statement in which the position of the predicate requires to be filled with contents on the ground of indirect information, that is, *Y*'s characteristics. The following is a complete presentation of the interpretation of metaphor *Y* using the possibly simplest meaningful terms (in the way of Anna Wierzbicka's *lingua mentalis*):

X is ... In order to say what *X* is like, I am thinking about *Y*, because one may say about *X* what has been said about *Y*

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| <i>Y</i> is <i>y</i> '. | → | <i>X</i> is <i>y</i> '. |
| <i>Y</i> is <i>y</i> ''. | → | <i>X</i> is <i>y</i> ''. |
| <i>Y</i> is <i>y</i> '''. | — | |
| <i>Y</i> is <i>y</i> ''''. | → | <i>X</i> is <i>y</i> ''''. |
| etc. | | etc. |

Let us now apply this interpretative pattern to a metaphor which occurs in Maria Jasnorzewska-Pawlikowska's brief poem called *Love*.

Nie widziałam cię już od miesiąca.
I nic. Jestem może bledsza,
trochę śpiąca, trochę bardziej milcząca,
lecz widać można żyć bez powietrza.

⁸ Cf. T. Dobrzyńska: "Metafora a spójność tekstu" (Metaphor and Coherence), [in:] *Tekst i zdanie*, ed. by T. Dobrzyńska, E. Janus, Wrocław 1983; *Metafora*, Wrocław 1984; "Warunki interpretacji wypowiedzi metaforycznych" (Conditions for the Interpretation of Metaphorical Statements), [in:] *Teoria tekstu*, ed. by T. Dobrzyńska, Wrocław 1986.

[I have not seen you for a month. / So what. Perhaps I am a bit pale. / a bit sleepy. a bit more silent. / but it looks people can live without air.]

If you follow this text's internal links and recall the title, you will see the poem is woven around the central motif of "I need your love as much as the air I breathe." The woman who is speaking finds with surprise she is still alive, despite not having seen her lover for a month (seeing in the sense of meetings). Meeting her lover, his love for her, is as necessary for her as the air she breathes. So,

Your love is for me ... In order to say what your love for me is like I am thinking about the air that one breathes, because I can say about your love what has been said about the air one breathes.

Air is breathed.

Air is indispensable for Your love is indispensable
everybody to live (and so → for me to live.
for me too).

Air is gaseous. —

Air is transparent. —

Air, accordingly, is the vehicle of the metaphor in this text. To comprehend the meaning of the metaphor, it is necessary to invoke your elementary knowledge of air's properties. Air can be attributed the connotation "indispensable for life." This alone may suffice to comprehend the metaphor's meaning, but of course cursory knowledge of air embraces a full array of properties we know about, say that air is transparent, light, gaseous, and so on. But these properties are useless in the quoted metaphor. They may be useful in other metaphorical utterances sometimes leading to opposite meanings to the one given to it by Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. The colloquial Polish metaphorical expression "You are air to me," can be interpreted to mean "I ignore you. For me you don't even exist," in which case the property of transparency (and so invisibility) is being taken advantage of.

The interpretative operations the above formula purports to envisage lead to a discovery of the metaphorical predicate we are looking for. But this can only be done when the recipient can invoke a number of features of the metaphorical vehicle, that is, when he or she comprehends the expression which performs the part of vehicle for the metaphor and when he or she has at least partly familiar

with it. Metaphors the vehicle of which is incomprehensible for the recipient cannot possibly be interpreted. Let me illustrate this with an example.⁹

Bo Ts'uj-i, the Chinese poet, describing the pouring of wine into bowls says:

Opening the pitcher I pour out into bowls
Jasper juice.

If, interpreting this text, we are able to construe the reference of the words “jasper juice” as wine from its broader context, then we can create the metaphorical utterance “Wine is jasper-juice-like.” (Incidentally, we have got to know the meaning of “jasper” to know the poet cannot possibly mean juice being squeezed out of jasper rock.) Proceeding with the interpretation, we would pass on from the adjectival form of “jasper” to the connotation of the substantive “jasper”. A Polish, as indeed any European, reader should instantly see that he may not be able to guess the poet’s original intention for even if we are familiar with jasper’s physical properties we do not know what functions it played in Chinese culture, what value was attributed to it, or what symbolic meaning if any it had. One can suppose that to understand the quoted excerpt of the Chinese poem it should suffice to recognize jasper as a valuable material. Wine, then, is perhaps a precious enough liquid to match the price of jasper. This, apparently, finishes the interpretation of the metaphor.

However, the sinologist who commented on this line¹⁰ did not stop at this point. He made a small yet significant correction in the list of properties connoted by jasper which were used in metaphorical utterances in the Chinese literary tradition. According to the commentator, the features involved could have included “beautiful,” “wonderful” etc., which held for wine. But there is more to that. It turned out that the entire expression “jasper juice” is a conventional periphrase meaning a magical drink capable of prolonging life the production of which was ascribed to revered monks knowing the secrets. Jasper juice, accordingly, could be the counterpart of the

⁹ Cf. Pu Sun-lin, *Lisi chary. Rasskazy Lao Chzhaia o chudesakh*, Moskva 1970, p. 345, note to p. 123 (the quotation is a translation from Russian).

¹⁰ The commentary to Pu Sun-lin’s stories was written by the outstanding Russian sinologist, academician V. M. Aleksejev, who also translated the stories.

aqua vitae—the water of life—of European mythology. The Greek nectar is perhaps even better a counterpart.

If we read the studied poetic line with this commentary, the metaphor will assume a different meaning, for wine will appear to be a life-giving drink desired as strongly as longevity and health; its supreme value results from its magical power. But in order to interpret that metaphor it is necessary to know that “jasper juice” became a conventional designation of a life-giving drink, that is, the reader must have an intimate knowledge of certain semiotic processes which had occurred in Chinese culture before the poem was written.

It is not always necessary for the recipient to be equally active in interpreting metaphorical statements. Some metaphors are intended for the recipient to construe the sense on his own. The road between the vehicle and its occasional meaning in such expressions has first to be paved, and the recipient must review the vehicle’s semantic and connotative features and decide afterwards which of them may be relevant in the context. At the other extreme there are metaphors the reception of which is largely automatic: the figurative meanings of such metaphors have become conventions of the language and so the recipient does not have to look for them on his own but should, quite simply, be familiar with them. Many of those metaphors are predicate constructs in which the part of vehicle is played an expression with conventional allegorical or symbolic meaning. Names of beasts from the Aesopian zodiac, which were used to designate human qualities, are good examples of allegories commonly used in metaphorical utterances. Without elaborating on this point, let me only mention that metaphorical use can draw on results of semiotic processes taking place in the creation of allegorical meaning; and, conversely, metaphorical statements, which invoke repeatedly the same or closely related connotative features, may signal a first stage of the given word turning into a symbol, a conventional allegorical sign.

Conventional metaphors are products of specific cultures. They emerge out of texts circulated in a culture. The above-mentioned metaphorical description of human qualities with names of beasts was ushered in by fables.

Another source of conventional metaphors are stereotyped comparisons (e.g., hyperbolic metaphors such as “She is an angel!” derive

from comparative expression “she is as good as an angel”). Similarly, cursory stories and anecdotes gave rise to *antonomasia*, i.e. the figurative use of a proper name. All expressions of this kind have a definite metaphorical meaning, which only must be invoked, that is, referred to an object which is the subject of the utterance.

But this cannot be done without participating in the culture concerned. You have got to be familiar with semantic conventions holding in the given culture, and to a broader extent than what knowledge of the language ordinarily implies, for you also need to know meanings of petrified metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions having such specific meanings hold in social groups which may be very large as well as very small. Sometimes they come to acquire metaphorical meanings only inside small groups of people sharing a common body of experiences and communication behaviours, say a family, a circle of friends, a working group on a certain job. But this kind of community may involved very large groups, too, extending beyond the boundaries of speech communities.

Let us look at the following excerpt from Wisława Szymborska’s poem *Large Number*:

Non omnis moriar – przedwczesne strapienie.
 Czy jednak cała żyję i czy to wystarcza.
 Nie wystarczało nigdy, a tym bardziej teraz.
 Wybieram odrzucając, bo nie ma innego sposobu,
 ale to, co odrzucam, liczniejsze jest,
 gęstsze, natarczywsze jest niż kiedykolwiek.
 Kosztem nieopisanych strat – wierszyk, westchnienie.
 Na gromkie powołania odzywam się szeptem.
 Ile przemilczam, tego nie wypowiem.
 Mysz u podnóża macierzystej góry.
 Życie trwa kilka znaków pazurkiem na piasku.

[Non omnis moriar – no worry. / But, am I all alive? And, is that enough? / It never was, and now less than ever. / I choose by rejection, for that’s all I can do. / But what I reject is larger, / is denser, more persistent than ever. / The price of unspeakable loss is a brief poem, a sigh. / To stentorian invocations I reply in whisper. / Just how much I conceal I dare not say. / A mouse at the foot of its parent mountain. / Life lasts just a few scratches on sand.]

The meaning of this excerpt is being built in different ways; by starting with a quotation which imparts to the words *non omnis moriar* (I shall not altogether die) the importance of words uttered by a great man, who is perfectly aware of his greatness and place

in history: by delexicalizing genetic metaphors (stentorous invocations are being responded to with a whisper); by infringing upon and transforming idiomatic expressions ("life lasts just a few scratches on sand"). There is no need for us to go any deeper into the semantic fabric of the quoted lines. Let me just point at the line about a mouse "at the foot of its parent mountain." That line—in literal reading—does not seem to fit well the preceding text. It must be construed as a metaphor, and the interpretation proceeds along a ready-made pattern known from the tradition of fable. To discover that interpretation, it suffices to recognize the quoted line as a paraphrase of the fabulous motif of "a mountain that gave birth to a mouse," which is allegorical language to describe situations in which the result of some actions turns out to be negligible, despite grand declarations. This formula has established itself as a proverb, and Szyborska uses it in self-irony. The quoted line, then, relies on what is a widely known semantic convention. It lends itself easily to translation into many languages, including all European ones.

We have now discussed several aspects of the intelligibility of metaphor. I have pointed out that in order to interpret a metaphor we have got first to grasp the meaning of the vehicle in its entire body of semiotic links; we have got to realize its full meaning and connotations; and where conventional metaphors are involved it is necessary for the recipient also to know their petrified meanings. But exactly how important conventional metaphors really are in their strongly determined meanings is, in a way, a secondary question. What about interpretations of nonconventional metaphors? In what way does the sender of the metaphorical utterance control its meaning? The sender is not keen on getting just any resonance at the receiving end, but on a specific one; since an utterance is addressed to another individual, the speaker expects its reception to be convergent with the intended message. That expectation goes along with each type of utterance and finds expression in that the speaker takes the same perspective as his recipient.¹¹ The same happens when a metaphor is used.

¹¹ That the recipient's perspective must be recognized as primary and constitutive for verbal communication is a thesis put forward and developed by A. Bogusławski in his studies: cf. for example, "Słowo o tekście i zdaniu" (A Word on Text and Sentence). [in:] *Tekst i zdanie*.

But because of the specific pattern of metaphorical meaning, the matter is more involved in this case. The message is not being communicated directly. By using a metaphorical vehicle the sender merely drops a hint about where the recipient should look for the meaning, namely among the vehicle's semantic and connoted features. An interpreter of a message may well construe the meaning of a metaphor from other elements than the sender wished. In conversation such an interpretative gap can easily be noticed and removed, but in perusal inadequate interpretation often generates contradictions in construing the utterance, and this is a signal that the adopted interpretative hypothesis requires reformulation.

If he wants to forestall any significant gap in interpreting a metaphor by his partner in an act of verbal communication, the sender must take account of those groups of connotations that are borne out by other figurative meanings, or those which are confirmed, as lexical connotations, in other derivative elements of the language. So, certain stereotypes can be said to establish themselves, which justify the expectation of a given resonance at the receiving end. I do not mean to say the metaphor's meaning should become fully determined, as is the case with conventional metaphors. But very often—whenever judgements and opinions about any given term are shared widely enough—the meaning of a metaphor is more or less under control. If the speaker wants his utterance to be intelligible, he must take into account the connotative stereotypes of the words he is using and he must adapt the meaning of his metaphor to them.

There are certain utterances that do not conform to this rule, specifically those which are intended to bring out individual expression, closed within a hermetic world of the speaker's own fantasies and activating his intimate areas of associative links. Some kinds of lyrical poetry is like this. Still, an overwhelming majority of texts is construed in such a way that the recipient's interpretation can roughly coincide with the sender's intended meaning, that is, that the sender's and the recipient's respective readings of the metaphor should not be mutually contradictory.

To conclude, metaphorical communication is naturally dependent on the cultural background of participants in the act of communication. Communication between them is possible when their respective knowledge relevant for the text involved is largely the same, and this

happens when terms in the text fall into the sender's and the recipient's common world and when the two attribute similar connotative meanings to terms used as figures of speech. Metaphor thus appears to be undeniably a culture-dependent phenomenon, and it can only function in reliance on a sense of closeness which results from a group's shared experience and development.

And this is why I wish to challenge Ted Cohen's opinion quoted at the outset: a sense of community is not, as Cohen contends, the purpose of communication involving metaphor, but its condition. Unless this condition is met, communication cannot be successful, or only apparently so.*

Transl. by Zygmunt Nierada

* The Polish text appears in *Konotacja*, a collection of essays ed. by J. Bartmiński, Lublin. The questions outlined in this text are discussed at length by the author in her book *Metafora* (Wrocław, 1984) in the series called *Poetyka. Zarys Encyklopedyczny*, where she gives a systematic exposition of metaphorical meaning underlining its predicative and indeterminate nature. The author unfolds her own views against a backdrop of modern critical discussions and disputes, with numerous references to earlier research work. She presents the relationship between metaphor and verbal deviation as interpreted by different critics. Metaphor proper (which is alive and novel) is distinguished from genetic linguistic metaphor which is an element of the linguistic code. Studying metaphorical meaning, the process of its generation and interpretation, Dobrzyńska uses simple semantic elements which are the means Anna Wierzbicka employs in her semantic explanations (cf. *Semantic primitives*, Frankfurt 1972; *Lingua mentalis*, Sydney 1980, and several other studies). Having described the generation of metaphorical meaning along with possible linguistic forms of figurative predication Dobrzyńska shows the difference between metaphor and such phenomena as symbol and allegory, literal "metaphor-like" expressions in fairy tale and fantastic fiction, or expressions invoking phenomenological images (i.e. images structured only by rules of perception and set free from under the control of rational knowledge of the world). She emphasizes the contextual character of metaphor (among other things, she singles out some difficulties in figurative communication in the topological aspect, say in fairy tale, science fiction and lyrical poetry). Dobrzyńska then presents threats to coherence in metaphorical texts, with reference to the thematic-rhematic distinction. She demonstrates possibilities and limitations of metaphorical communication extending her description over various communicative situations and pointing at the cultural background of those participating in the act of communication, that is, at their "common knowledge." The interpretative pattern Dobrzyńska develops in the book is subsequently used to study figurative expressions of different degrees of complexity, ranging from everyday platitudes through to original metaphors to be found in lyrical poetry, and intricate figures of speech.