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THE INTERPRETATION OF NOVEL METAPHORS IN CONTEXT

In Orthony's *Metaphor and Thought* (Ortony 1979 : 172), Bruce Fraser seeks to respond to Allan Paivio's challenge demanding that a method should be developed allowing to collect "detailed factual information" about precisely how people respond to a novel metaphorical expression. Fraser boils this down to the issue whether the interpretation of a metaphorical expression is predictable on the basis of the linguistic properties of the utterance alone. With this question in mind, he develops a set of test items which are clearly semantically anomalous, and which conform to a predication pattern with a pronominal subject (He/She is an octopus, He/She is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, ...). These statements are submitted with no other context or referent to a board of forty native informants for interpretation. Although the investigation yields some interesting indications (notably, some degree of agreement on the positive or negative evaluation connoted by particular foci, and a frequent differentiation between the interpretation when predicated of a male versus a female), there is, as one might have expected, little or no evidence of consistency in the zero-context interpretations. But Fraser's point, albeit negative, deserves to be made : it upholds such theories of metaphor as claim that semantic anomaly by itself is not a sufficient condition for a statement to be qualified as metaphorical : on the one hand, the statement may be "merely absurd" if it responds to no communicative intention or if the focus is not treated seriously; in other terms, a sentence is a metaphor only when it is intended to be one. On the

other hand, semantically nondeviant propositions may turn out to be metaphorical given the proper linguistic or extralinguistic context. The minimal definition of metaphor, then, must contain a pragmatic prong in addition to the semantic one.

One may justifiably wonder, then whether an investigation of the response to novel metaphors isolated from any form of communicative or extensional context could possibly have produced the "detailed factual information" that Paivio was looking for. There is, in our view, more of a point in asking to what extent an actual novel metaphor effectually conveys its author's intention or insight than in wondering what might be the possible responses to a fictive construct which is a potential metaphor only because of its form. Of course, the presence of a clarifying context and/or an extensional referent would seriously limit the range of arbitrary extrapolation, but then again, it is by no means certain that the haphazard interpretation of haphazardly chosen images, albeit productive, can be used to assess in a valid manner the understanding of metaphorical statements.

Had Fraser not rather arbitrarily narrowed his investigation down to the study of propositions in a zero-context, he might have found a valuable clue in Paivio's paper which constituted his original incentive (Ortony 1979 : 160). Paivio has an intimation that Osgood's semantic differential approach may be useful in the study of the comprehension of metaphor. I cannot but sympathise with this viewpoint. As early as 1975, I had suggested to proceed along similar lines myself - an attempt that was to materialise in a survey on the reception and comprehension of religious imagery (van Noppen 1976, 1978, 1979). The approach offers "a combination of controlled association and scaling procedures designed to measure the meanings of signs". The meaning associated with units of messages by the language users is judged against a series of scales representing a continuum between polar pairs of adjectives which verbally define various dimensions of experience. Early research on the development of the method drew

attention to the kinship between synesthetic association of various forms of experience on the one hand, and the processes of metaphoric assimilation when these associations were given a linguistic form on the other. This observation led to the proposal to use the method as an index of certain aspects, especially connotative aspects, of linguistic meaning.

When adapted to metaphorical propositions, however, the procedure has some pitfalls and disadvantages of its own. Osgood's forced-choice associations, as well as the Kent-Rosanoff association norms, are designed to investigate the meanings of individual words -- i.e. outside their contexts. If we are to enquire into the meanings of words as they appear in their metaphorical frames, the respondents must be given the whole proposition. This in turn entails that the informants' reactions to the focal term may be swamped by associations stemming from other phases of the utterance. This may be in part remedied by satisfying oneself that the focus stand out clearly in the propositions. The method of stylistic investigation proposed by Eberhard Frey (1975) may be useful here.

Another drawback resides in the fact that the semantic association grids constitute a forced-choice mode of surveying, while Fraser's open-ended method (although it opens the door to almost any fantasy, Cf. Ortony 1979 : 183) does not pre-condition the informant's response. Giving the respondents a chance to paraphrase the metaphorical statement instead of, or better, in addition to completing the grid may constitute a solution for those subjects who fail to associate proposition with the given stimuli, or who feel that the grids form too compelling a corset.

In drawing up the grids, we are given the choice between Osgood's own series of paired adjectives and substituting for it an *ad hoc* list of association categories. It seems to me that if the author's communicative intent is known and if the meaning intended can be ventilated into a sufficient number of

aspects and components that may be represented by means of polarities, the latter solution must furnish the most precise indications. Osgood's categories, on the other hand, offer the convenience of a pre-existing and well-experimented system allowing a factor analysis in terms of evaluation/potency/activity. It might be interesting, moreover, given a somewhat larger bank of informants, to use Fraser's open-ended method as a first, heuristic step (but using context-determinate rather than zero-context propositions), to distil from its results the polarities that appear as recurrent, relevant and interesting, and to enter these in the semantic association grids. Clearly, this is more easily said than done, but it seems to me that if we are to collect information on the reception of novel metaphors which are both detailed and factual, the venture is worth trying.

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