

Metaphor: ad hoc concepts, literal meaning and images

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1. Introduction

Here are some examples of language use which are generally agreed to be metaphorical:¹

1. My lawyer is a shark.
2. The river sweated oil and tar.
3. Love is the lighthouse and the rescued mariners. (from Oskar Davico's *Hana*)
4. And when you find yourself at the cliff edge, do not be afraid to jump:
either you will fly or He will catch you in his arms. (Christian proselytizer, attested)
5. The buds of hope and love called out by a day or two of sunshine are frozen again and
again till the tree is killed. (H. B. Stowe 1857)
6. I find myself thinking why don't you go to that compartment in your brain where ideas
are meant to be found and knock on the door; you just might find it isn't completely
closed. (Simon Armitage *The Review Show*, BBC2, April 2010,
discussing some current script-writers)
7. The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on. (Carl Sandburg: *Fog*)
8. If they be two, they are two so ['they' = 'our two souls']
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

¹ For the examples used throughout this paper I have borrowed freely from other authors (including Davidson, Moran, Reimer, Sperber & Wilson, Tirrell, Wearing) as well as introducing some of my own. Given the tight word limit, I don't acknowledge each individually.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

(John Donne: *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*)

I start with some preliminary, somewhat banal, observations about this disparate range of cases. While all of them have an evocative imagistic element, it seems to play a more dominant role in some than in others, most vividly in the detailed, extended metaphors in (7) and (8). Some of the examples seem more amenable to being described as informative, as having a more or less definite propositional content, than others: one might express agreement with the statement made by an utterance of (1) or object to the content of (6), insisting that the script-writers being criticised, who do a lot of cross-referencing to earlier movies, are in fact being creative. In the poetic cases, (3), (7) and (8), (dis)agreeing with propositional content would, if possible at all, be a mistake, while judging the aptness or insightfulness of the metaphor (its accuracy in capturing an experience or feeling) would be to the point, and the same might hold also for the more prosaic (5).

Clearly, some of the examples are more familiar, more frequently used (even conventionalised), than others: (1) tops the list in this respect, (2), (4), (5) and (6) are based on fairly familiar metaphorical schemes, and (3)², (7) and (8) are the most unusual and inventive, although the 'fog as a cat' has occurred before in English poetry. Some are spontaneous, spoken and conversational while others are highly wrought, extended over a length of text and clearly literary or poetic. I've tried to present a good range of linguistic forms rather than just the 'X is a Y' construction that sometimes dominates discussions. This is a frequent form in conversational metaphors where the aim is often to achieve a strong swift expression of praise or blame ('She's a bulldozer/pig/mouse/battle-axe/dragon/block of ice/angel/saint/doormat', etc.). It is also an easy form to convert into a corresponding simile, so serves well the purpose of those who want to explore the simile-metaphor relation.³ In fact, there seem to be few, if any, formal linguistic restrictions on where a metaphorically used expression can appear in an utterance.

Some of these properties seem to cluster together: being conversational, spontaneous, conventional, single word metaphors and having a propositional content, on the one hand; being literary, carefully crafted, extended and developed, expressive of a feeling or sensation, highly imagistic, on the other hand. So it looks as if there are simply two kinds of metaphor, the 'ordinary' and the 'literary', and that we should not expect a single account that applies to them all. While I don't think that there is a clear-cut distinction between two kinds of metaphor, I will argue that there are two different routes to the understanding of metaphors - a quick, local, on-line meaning-adjustment process and a slower, more global appraisal of the literal meaning of the whole.

² The example in (3) is one line taken from a poem which is quoted more fully (in translation) in section 5.

³ Virtually every possible relation between a metaphor and its corresponding simile has its advocates: metaphors as ellipsed similes, similes as hedged metaphors, distinct tropes with much the same effects, distinct tropes with significantly different effects, and others. Current psycholinguistic evidence tends to support the fourth position but confines its experimental testing to very simple cases ('X is (like) Y'). I don't pursue the issue in this paper.

As a philosophical backdrop to the dual processing account I will present, the next section sets out two broad positions on the nature of metaphor, the proposition view and the image view. Each of these captures a part of the story about metaphor, I think, but neither, on its own, adequately characterises the full range of cases. Instead, I will suggest that the propositional and imagistic components are both present across the range of metaphors, irrespective of which of the two processing modes is employed, but that differences in their relative weightings tend to correspond with which of the two routes is taken.

2. Proposition theories and image theories

Martin Davies (1982) drew a (deliberately) broad-brush distinction between two kinds of philosophical accounts of metaphor: proposition theories and image theories⁴. The primary exponent of an image theory is Davidson (1978/84)⁵, according to whom there is no such thing as a metaphorical meaning ('Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more') and what a metaphor does is bring to our attention aspects of the topic that we might not otherwise notice, by provoking us or nudging us to 'see' the topic in a new or unusual way. Rather than communicating a cognitive content, a metaphor evokes certain responses, including mental images: discussing the now dead metaphor 'He was burned up', Davidson says 'When the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears.' (ibid: 253). In apparent opposition to this position, advocates of one or another version of a proposition theory maintain that a speaker who uses language metaphorically may m-intend (in Grice's sense) or ostensively communicate (in Sperber & Wilson's 1986/95 sense) a propositional content and may even assert such a content (Bergmann 1982).

Until very recently, the stance taken by the proposition theorists was that this content is indirectly communicated, as an implicature (or implicatures) of the metaphorical utterance (Grice 1975, Searle 1979, Sperber & Wilson 1985/86). Although there are fundamental differences between the Grice/Searle and Sperber/Wilson accounts, in particular with regard to the interpretive procedure used for recovering the speaker's intended meaning, they share the assumption that the proposition literally expressed is, taken as a whole, merely a vehicle by means of which, guided by certain communicative presumptions, the implicated speaker-meaning is recovered. All acknowledge the rich open-endedness of metaphoric interpretation, the indeterminacy of the speaker's intention in this connection and the indefinite range of the implications that might be recovered. In this, the proposition theorists may seem to go some way towards Davidson's position, at least as he articulates it here: 'When we try to say what a metaphor "means", we soon realise there is no end to what we want to mention' (ibid: 263).⁶

⁴ In Davies (1982), the proponents of the 'proposition' theory are Searle (1979) and Bergmann (1982), while the main image theorist is Davidson (1978/84) with Max Black (1979) more a fellow traveller than not. Now, so many years and so many papers on metaphor later, we can add to the 'proposition' camp Sperber & Wilson (1985/86, 2008), Glucksberg (2001), Carston (2002), Hills (1997), Stern (2001), Wearing (2006) and to the 'image' camp Levin (1993), Moran (1989), Reimer (2001), Camp (2008). Needless to say, this is the broadest of broad categorisation and there are important differences among authors within one group or the other, and some authors mentioned as belonging on the one side also have a foot on the other.

⁵ All page references to the Davidson paper are to the 1984 reprinting.

⁶ Sperber and Wilson, in particular, develop a detailed account of this open-endedness of interpretation. They talk of metaphors as having a cognitive content which can be analysed 'in terms of an indefinite array of weak implicatures' (1985/86: 170), and, in a discussion of poetic effects more generally, they say such effects need not add entirely new assumptions to the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer: 'Instead, they marginally increase the manifestness of a great many weakly manifest assumptions ... poetic effects create common impressions rather than common knowledge' (1986/95: 224).

However, in the end, as Davies (1982: 74) points out, the big difference between the image theorist and the proposition theorist is captured in the following passage from Davidson: ‘If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature, this would not in itself make trouble. ... But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is *not propositional in character*.’ (ibid: 262-63; my emphasis). And Davidson goes on to draw his well-known analogy with pictures, drawings, maps and photographs, finishing with: ‘Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.’ In short, the literal content of a metaphor (which is its only ‘meaning’) evokes an image or images and the result is that we see one thing as another (the lawyer as a shark, the river’s contamination with oil as sweating, the two lovers as the two arms of a mathematical compass, etc).

A striking feature of Davidson’s paper is his concern for *an explanation of how metaphors work*, of how we understand them. His central dissatisfaction with talk of metaphorical or figurative meanings and of metaphorical truths is not that they are entirely vacuous notions but that they do no explanatory work: ‘these ideas don’t explain metaphor, metaphor explains them. Once we understand a metaphor we can call what we grasp the “metaphorical truth” and (up to a point) say what the “metaphorical meaning” is’ (ibid: 247). This seems essentially right to me⁷ and what follows in the next two sections is an attempt to meet this call for an explanation, for an answer to the question of how metaphors work, interpreted as a question about the mental processes of metaphor understanding.

Ultimately, the account encompasses aspects of both the proposition theory and the image theory since, in my view, full understanding of any metaphor involves both a propositional/conceptual component and an imagistic component, though the relative weight and strength of each of these varies greatly from case to case. The distinction made in the next two sections between two modes of processing focuses on the way in which the propositional component may vary across different metaphors, both with regard to how it is derived (more or less directly) and to its strength or determinacy. The place of imagery in the story is deferred to section 5, where it will be suggested that images are not only non-propositional *effects* of metaphor comprehension but also, at least in some instances, *vehicles* used in the recovery of propositional effects.

The account takes the cognitive-propositional approach to metaphor developed within relevance theory as its starting point (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95, 2008; Carston 2002) and, given that the aim of the account is to make a case for two distinct ways of processing metaphor, the discussion inevitably employs terms more familiar in psychology than philosophy, such as ‘processing load’, ‘semantic priming’, and ‘degree of activation’.

3. How some instances of metaphor work

Recently, cognitively-oriented theorists have taken what might seem to be an even stronger propositional stance than that mentioned in the previous section: they claim that speakers of metaphorical utterances not only convey an array of implicatures but also directly communicate a propositional content, a constituent of which is, in effect, a metaphorical

⁷ Davidson briefly indicates that he would say much the same for ‘any use of language’ (ibid: 263), implicitly drawing here a distinction between encoded or ‘standing’ linguistic meaning and the meanings and effects brought about by the pragmatics of language in use (whether literal or non-literal). The account that follows in the next section is very much in keeping with this outlook.

meaning of some subpart of the utterance (e.g. of ‘shark’ in (1), or ‘sweated’ in (2) or, perhaps, ‘the lighthouse and the rescued mariners’ in (3)).⁸

As developed within the relevance-theoretic framework, the idea is that these are just like other cases of loose uses for which a word’s standing linguistic meaning is pragmatically adjusted or modulated during comprehension. The result is an occasion-specific sense or *ad hoc* concept which contributes to the proposition explicitly communicated (the ‘explicature’ or truth-conditional content of the utterance):

9. Utterance: My lawyer is a shark
Explicature: LAWYER X IS A SHARK*
Implicatures: LAWYER X IS RUTHLESS, MERCILESS TO HIS OPPONENTS, EXPLOITS HIS CLIENTS FINANCIALLY, etc.
(where the asterisk distinguishes the communicated concept SHARK* from the lexically encoded concept SHARK)⁹

Consider an example which can have a range of loose interpretations:

10. The water is boiling.

An utterance of (10) could be intended and understood in any of the following ways: *strictly literally*, communicating that the water is BOILING, so at or above boiling point; as an *approximation*, communicating that it is close enough to BOILING for the differences to be inconsequential for current purposes (e.g. for making a cup of coffee); *hyperbolically*, so not BOILING but closer to it than expected or desired (e.g. too hot to wash one’s hands in comfortably); or *metaphorically*, suggesting, for instance, that the water, although not necessarily anywhere near boiling point, is moving agitatedly, bubbling, emitting vapour, etc. In each case, a different concept is communicated, all of them derived from the literal encoded concept, and on the non-literal interpretations the concept’s denotation is broader to varying degrees than that of the lexical concept.

The claim is that all these interpretations are reached in essentially the same way, namely, by an inferential pragmatic process of deriving contextual implications which meet particular standards of cognitive relevance.¹⁰ In the course of that process, an explicature is being pragmatically developed on the basis of the decoded linguistic meaning, elements of which, specifically the concept BOILING, may be adjusted by a backwards inference process in response to particular hypothesised implicatures. Consider a context in which the hearer has just run a bath for the speaker, who steps into it and then utters (10); typically, the relevant implications here are that the water is too hot to bathe in, feels unpleasant on the skin, and so on. Much of the information associated with the literal encoded concept BOILING would not enter into the interpretative process at all (information about actual boiling point, the use of boiling water for sterilising instruments, the damage it can do to human skin, etc). The lexically encoded concept is adjusted to an *ad hoc* concept BOILING* which warrants just these context-specific implications and whose denotation is consequently broader than that of the encoded concept: it includes not only actual instances of boiling point but a range of other lower temperatures. This is an instance of a hyperbolic use and the idea is that a metaphoric

⁸ See, for instance, Bezuidenhout 2001, Glucksberg 2001, Stern 2001, Carston 2002, Wilson & Sperber 2002, Recanati 2004, Wearing 2006, Sperber & Wilson 2008, Wilson & Carston 2008.

⁹ Small caps are used throughout to represent concepts as distinct from linguistic expressions.

¹⁰ For an account of what these standards of relevance are and how they are motivated by the very nature of ostensive communication (against the backdrop of the general cognitive drive toward maximising the benefits and minimising the costs of processing new information), see Sperber & Wilson 1986/95.

use works in essentially the same way. In an appropriate context, perhaps a violent storm at sea, an utterance of (10) would carry implicatures about the way the sea looks (churning and seething, throwing up foam and vapour) and perhaps about how the speaker experiences it (as overpowering, dangerous, frightening), with quite possibly no implications at all concerning temperature. Again, the encoded concept BOILING would be adjusted so that the explicature as a whole could play its role as a premise grounding these relevance-based implications and, again, the *ad hoc* concept derived would be considerably broader in denotation than the lexical concept.¹¹

An important question here concerns the appropriate notion of metaphorical content (and the content of *ad hoc* concepts more generally). Attempts to provide a literal paraphrase of metaphorically used language typically fail to specify its content in two ways: (a) they include much more than could possibly be part of the explicit propositional content because they articulate likely implications and effects of the metaphor; (b) they miss the essence of the metaphor's content and this, I suggest, is because probably it simply cannot be expressed literally, hence the use of a metaphor in the first place.¹² Others have confronted this issue head on,¹³ so I will simply assume here that a notion of metaphorical content can be delineated which is appropriate to its role in explicature (the utterance's truth-conditional content).

The *ad hoc* concept account of metaphor seems to be very much at odds with Davidson's 'no metaphorical meaning, no cognitive content' position and his emphasis on non-propositional effects. More generally, there might seem to be some tension between what people usually find most striking about metaphors – their sensory, imagistic, phenomenal properties (their figurativeness) – and the apparently rather general, abstract nature of the *ad hoc* concepts the current account delivers.¹⁴ Perhaps, as has been suggested by some, this is because this kind of theory applies only to relatively conventionalised or routinised cases like 'shark', 'saint', 'devil', 'boiling', 'block of ice', 'bulldoze' and 'butcher', for which a second, metaphorical, sense is listed in some dictionaries and whose evocative aspect could be argued to have been lost or greatly diminished as its conceptual content solidified.

However, the scope of the account is intended to be considerably wider than this. The interpretive process outlined above is context-sensitive and pragmatic, so should apply to the understanding of relatively novel, unconventional cases, such as the following:

11. The woods are *laughing*.
12. My garden is a *slum* of bloom.
13. Context: Discussion among some young people about older, rather dominant, female members of their families.
Utterance: You should meet my granny, Paul. She's the one would put manners on

¹¹ There is a reconfiguring here of traditional relations among tropes: hyperbole and metaphor are closely aligned (in fact, allegedly, indistinguishable in some instances) and metaphors and corresponding similes are taken to work very differently (there is no radically broadened *ad hoc* concept in the explicature of 'John is like a shark').

¹² Behind this suggestion lies a particular view of the language/thought or word/concept relation, according to which human conceptual resources far outstrip the meanings encoded in linguistic systems (Carston 2002).

¹³ See Wearing (2006) for a characterisation of a notion of metaphorical content which puts it on a par with the standardly 'thin' notion of literal content.

¹⁴ This is most marked for accounts that take the *ad hoc* concept to be superordinate to the literal encoded concept, e.g. analyses on which 'My lawyer is a shark' expresses a concept SHARK*, which includes all actual sharks and certain human beings, and is paraphrased as the category of predatory, aggressive, tenacious entities (Glucksberg 2001).

you. She's a real *paint remover*.¹⁵

The questions whether and, if so, how the account in terms of *ad hoc* concepts might have the resources to not only allow for, but give proper weight to, the phenomenologically salient imagistic properties of metaphors such as these will be broached in section 5.

4. How some other cases of metaphor work

Although the explanatory reach of the *ad hoc* concept approach extends beyond conventional metaphors, I don't think it works for all occurrences of metaphor, in particular (but not only) many of the more extended and/or literary examples. In the cases I have in mind, the literal meaning of the whole metaphorical text or utterance plays a more central and sustained role than it does for the examples just discussed, where the literal meaning of lexical or phrasal subparts is reworked locally online into a metaphorical meaning (the *ad hoc* concept).

Davidson's statement that 'the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting' (ibid: 249) expresses an intuition shared by many who investigate metaphor understanding, though exactly what it means needs further explication. Even in the cases of relatively rapid local meaning adjustment the literal meaning doesn't just disappear once the expressed content has been recovered. Perhaps one initial indicator of this is the often noted jarring effects of so-called mixed metaphors:

14. If you find a student with a spark of imagination, water it. (Tirrell 1989)

This is a case where the intended meaning is pretty clear and can be readily accounted for in terms of the pragmatic construction of *ad hoc* concepts:

SPARK* (rough paraphrase: small beginnings of something that could grow to be substantial/vibrant/positive/productive)

WATER* (rough paraphrase: nurture, encourage, help to grow/develop)

Once the intended meaning of 'spark' is accessed in the online interpretation process, there is no obvious reason for its literal meaning to remain cognitively active, and yet it seems that it must do since many people at least are struck by the clash between the relevant interpretation and the conception that comes from the literal meaning of 'spark' and 'water'.

There is evidence from psycholinguistic experiments designed to tap on-line processing which indicates that literal meaning is always activated initially, even in heavily metaphor-biased contexts and – more significantly – that it remains activated well beyond the point at which the relevant, i.e. the metaphorical, interpretation has been recovered (Rubio Fernandez 2007). The conclusion drawn is that deactivation of the literal meaning requires a higher-level process of suppression than is involved in other meaning selection processes such as the disambiguation of homonyms like 'bank' or 'coach' where the irrelevant meaning disappears significantly more quickly.¹⁶

¹⁵ The first two examples are discussed by Wearing (2006); the third is taken from Colm Toibin's novel *The Blackwater Lighthouse* (p.37).

¹⁶ The psycholinguistic methodology used (cross-modal priming) is intended to reveal processes at a subpersonal (unconscious) level while, clearly, the effects of the mixed metaphor are consciously registered. The general point of interest here is the ongoing accessibility of aspects of literal meaning that are not part of the understood propositional content. The difference between those that remain subpersonal and those that surface to consciousness seems to be a matter of some sort of threshold in degree of activation (for relevant discussion, see Recanati 2004: 76-80).

The import of this ‘lingering of the literal’ for metaphor understanding becomes more pressing when we turn to metaphors that are extended and developed over a stretch of text or a whole poem, such as John Donne’s ‘mathematical compass’ conceit in example (8), or any number of Shakespeare’s extended metaphors. It stretches credulity that these cases, which often involve multiple sub-metaphors within the main metaphor (for instance, the ‘leaning and hearkening’ of the fixed foot of the compass in the Donne example), are understood via the pragmatic mechanism of *ad hoc* concept construction. This would be a matter of multiple quite extreme adjustments of many individual lexical meanings, one after the other, and probably further readjustments at phrasal and higher levels, allegedly in response to contextual implications warranted by expectations of relevance. It can’t be ruled out that this is what goes on, of course, but there is another possibility, one which seems to me more in tune with the phenomenology of understanding these metaphors and which makes very natural use of the ongoing availability of literal meaning.

I’ll try to make the case for this second route to understanding through a consideration of two examples of moderately extended metaphor (space constraints preclude longer examples):¹⁷

15. Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare: *Macbeth* V.v. 24-30)

After the introduction of the topic, ‘Life’, virtually every word here is used metaphorically. Are we to suppose that we are forming *ad hoc* concept after *ad hoc* concept, WALKING-SHADOW*, POOR-PLAYER*, STRUTS*, FRETS*, HOUR*, STAGE*, even UPON*, and so on, replacing each of the literal lexical meanings in the developing interpretation? What appears to me to be going on here is that the literal meaning is not just lingering in the background (remaining activated even once a new metaphorical meaning has been formed), but has taken over from any process of metaphorical adjustment of concepts. The linguistically encoded concepts are sufficiently closely related that they semantically prime and reinforce each other, to the extent that their activation levels are so high that a literal interpretation unfolds – a description of an indifferent theatre performance. Then, a second, distinct but related, scenario develops, describing the vehement telling of a meaningless story. Of course, we are not there yet with grasping the metaphors, whose subject is human life. These sets of literal representations are framed or metarepresented,¹⁸ mentally held, and submitted for further reflective inferential processing. This process effectively extracts implications about life that are relevantly and plausibly attributable to Macbeth at this stage of the play - concerning its brevity and pointlessness, the deluded self-importance of each of us, how little our best efforts are valued by anyone else, and so on.

The central idea, then, is that the effort of metaphorical *ad hoc* concept formation is simply too great here, set against the persistent high activation (by backwards and forwards priming) of the closely associated literal meanings. The interpretation resulting from processing the literal scenario as a whole will consist of many weak implicatures and other

¹⁷ See Tirrell (1989) for more lengthy and intricate examples of extended metaphors from Shakespeare’s work, which might serve my point even better than the examples discussed here.

¹⁸ All I mean here by ‘metarepresenting’ the conceptual representation which comprises the literal meaning is that it is neither taken as descriptive/factual itself nor adjusted into another descriptive representation, but is held for a further process - of inspection, as it were, of its conceptual properties (implications, associations).

implications (different to some extent for different hearers/readers). There is no explicitly communicated propositional content other than the literal meaning itself represented within the mental equivalent of scare-quotes. In this latter respect, the account meshes with Davidson's insistence that a metaphor (and so also the metaphor maker) doesn't 'say anything beyond its literal meaning' (ibid: 246).

This kind of explanation would apply also to the understanding of the following passage from a contemporary novel:

16. Depression, in Karla's experience, was a dull, inert thing – a toad that squatted wetly on your head until it finally gathered the energy to slither off. The unhappiness she had been living with for the last ten days was a quite different creature. It was frantic and aggressive. It had fists and fangs and hobnailed boots. It didn't sit, it assailed. It *hurt* her. In the mornings, it slapped her so hard in the face that she reeled as she walked to the bathroom.

(Zoe Heller: *The Believers* p.263)

Again, rather than expending the inferential effort required to construct a lot of distinct *ad hoc* concepts, TOAD*, SQUAT-ON-YOUR-HEAD*, CREATURE*, FISTS*, FANGS*, HOB-NAILED-BOOTS*, etc., the highly accessible literal meanings impose themselves and a coherent set of conceptual representations is formed of a somewhat surreal world of repulsive amphibious creatures with different kinds of characteristics (some sitting inertly on human heads, some kicking and biting). From this set of descriptions (and accompanying imagery), taken as a whole, we derive implications that can plausibly apply to the human experiences of depression and raw unhappiness.

What I am suggesting is that there are two kinds or modes of metaphor processing: (a) a process of rapid on-line *ad hoc* concept formation which is continuous with the kind of context-sensitive pragmatic adjustments to encoded lexical meaning that are made in comprehending a variety of other loose and/or non-literal language uses, and (b) a process in which the literal meaning of metaphorically used language is maintained, framed or metarepresented, and subjected to slower, more reflective interpretive inferences that separate out implications that are plausibly speaker-meant. To put it concisely: on the first method, word meaning is pragmatically adjusted so as to capture the thought, and, on the second strategy, the thought or world conception is (albeit temporarily) made to correspond to the (literal) language.¹⁹ The first mode is, as it were, the normal mode – we are adjusting word meanings to a greater or lesser extent all the time in comprehending utterances, in accordance with our occasion-specific expectations of relevance. The switch to the second mode is made when a certain processing threshold or tipping point is reached, when the effort of *ad hoc* concept formation is too great relative to the dominance, the high accessibility, of the literal meaning. There may well be individual differences with regard to this threshold. And the move may, on occasion, be made deliberately, a top-down decision taken to go with the language and adopt a reflective contemplative stance on it.

¹⁹ This is akin to a distinction Elisabeth Camp made in a talk (Paris, 2006) between interpretation in a 'basic way' and interpretation in an 'imaginative surrealizing way', where on the basic way, we reconstrue our understanding of the words to fit our expectations about the world, while on the imaginative way, we reconstrue our sense of the world to fit a literal understanding of the words. However, I think her second way is broader than what I have in mind for metaphor, as it would include the understanding of allegories and other fictions and various kinds of pretence in language use. In a more recent paper, she herself distinguishes the imaginative activity involved in pretending that something is true from that involved in metaphorical construal (Camp 2009). See also Levin (1993) on a proposal for the understanding of specifically literary metaphors in terms of world construal (rather than language construal).

The idea here is not that it is only sustained and intricately developed metaphors, those that contain a critical mass of words whose literal meaning is mutually reinforcing, which will tip the interpretation process into the second mode. Rather, it is that whenever the processing load reaches a level at which the effort of accessing or constructing an *ad hoc* concept is too great, the system takes a different route (less steep and immediately demanding, but probably longer and slower). So, even certain metaphors that are not particularly lengthy or developed might have this kind of impact on the cognitive system. Consider, for instance, the following from Emily Dickinson (1863):²⁰

17. My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners -

Rather than infer a new concept LOADED-GUN*, it seems likely that the literal meaning of ‘a loaded gun’ is held and metarepresented – “A LOADED GUN” – and an explicit, deliberate process engaged, which assesses the implications and associations carried by this conceptual representation and selects those that might plausibly characterise a human life, specifically a life that “HAD STOOD IN CORNERS”. More generally, a range of different factors can be expected to play a role in determining which processing mode is employed in any given instance: how conventional or familiar the metaphorical use is versus how novel or creative it is, how extended or developed it is, whether it occurs in time-pressured face-to-face speech or in a literary text, and perhaps others.

Finally, consider again example (7), Sandburg’s ‘The fog comes / on little cat feet’. Sperber & Wilson (2008) discuss the cognitive effects these two lines have, including weak implicatures about the silent, smooth, stealthy way in which the fog arrives. They go on to say that the explicit content of these lines is that the fog comes ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET*, where this *ad hoc* concept is ‘the concept of a property that is difficult or impossible to define, a property possessed in particular by some typical movements of cats ... and, according to the poem, by the movement of fog. How is this *ad hoc* concept ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET* arrived at? By taking the poet to be attributing to the coming of the fog that property which contextually implies the very ideas suggested by the phrase “little cat feet”’ (p.102). Perhaps this is how some people’s understanding of the metaphor works and perhaps with rereading(s) more people would come to process it in this *ad hoc* concept way. However, the poem continues with ‘It sits looking / over harbor and city / on silent haunches / and then moves on’ and I suspect that, for many readers at least, especially on an initial reading, the literal meaning takes over and is metarepresented as a whole, along with the mental image of a large, soft, lightly padding but purposefully moving cat, and from these together are derived implications about the way the fog looks and feels.

The general claim of these two sections is that an account of metaphor understanding that covers the full range of cases needs to allow for two different modes of processing. On both of these, cognitive (propositional) speaker meaning is conveyed, but on the first route it consists of a direct, explicitly communicated propositional content (as well as some implicatures), while on the second route, it is entirely a matter of implicatures, often a dense cluster of weakly communicated implicatures. The focus so far has been on these conceptual components of metaphor understanding, with only occasional brief mentions of imagery. I have not yet addressed aspects of the familiar phenomenology of metaphor discussed in the introduction nor fully engaged with Davidson’s emphasis on the ‘seeing as’ or ‘noticing’ experience that a metaphor provides, and which, as with other pictorial phenomena, makes

²⁰ This is the opening line and a half of a poem in which this metaphor is, in fact, somewhat further developed, but even isolated like this it may be understood by means of the second mental route.

available an open-ended array of possible observations: 'A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.' (ibid: 263).²¹ In the next section, I consider the phenomenon of imaging in metaphor understanding, as it manifests itself in both of the processing routes outlined.

5. Imagery and literal meaning

A characteristic of some lyric poetry is not so much to develop the details of a single metaphor as to present a string of loosely connected metaphors. The following example demonstrates this clearly, with a series of vividly imagistic metaphors each giving expression to the transformative effects of love (the personified referent of 'she'):

18. She woke me up as the bright screech of rockets wakes up the forest
And now I am blind to you, you squinty-eyed vagrants.
Love is so lonely and so full of people.
Love is the lighthouse and the rescued mariners.

She makes my eyes burn – glowing torches in the crowd,
The sea and the fishing nets, the fish and the fishermen, are ripe with her.
Down the rope of the waterfall the eels slither with her
And cut-throat thugs sing songs like sparrows or kids at play.

(Oskar Davico: *Hana*)²²

Davidson's rejection of conceptualised metaphorical meaning and emphasis on the literal meaning of the words and their imagistic effects seems irresistibly right here – by staying with the literal meaning and the images it evokes we may come, at least partially, to understand how the world looks and feels to the poet in his exalted state of mind.

Among proposition theorists, Sperber & Wilson (1986/95, 2008) stand out for their engagement with the rich, open-endedness of the effects that many metaphors (and other poetic uses of language) can have. Nevertheless, their account remains resolutely propositional: 'What look like non-propositional effects associated with the expression of attitudes, feelings and states of mind can be approached in terms of weak implicature' (1986/95: 222), and 'if you look at these apparently affective effects through the microscope of relevance theory, you see a wide array of minute cognitive effects' (ibid: 224). Whether or not this is true of apparently affective effects of particular uses of language, I don't think it can be true of the imagery that seems to be characteristic of many metaphors and from which much of the affective dimension of a metaphor's effects seems to be derived.²³

A compelling case is made for the distinctive, *sui generis* nature of mental imagery by McGinn (2004). He claims that images are not reducible to (traces or faint copies of) percepts, nor to some sort of dense clustering of thoughts, nor to some kind of amalgam of percepts and concepts/thoughts. It is his critique of a particular 'cognitivist' view of images that is most relevant to my concerns here, a view on which an image is taken to be a conjunction of concepts, thoughts or propositions entertained simultaneously. McGinn argues against this

²¹ Here, for 'words' I would substitute 'words or concepts', thus allowing that we may employ in our thought and communicate to each other concepts that are not encoded in our linguistic systems. Like words, concepts are 'the wrong currency to exchange for a picture'.

²² I am very grateful to Vladimir Zegarac for this translation from the Serbian original.

²³ That images are evoked by metaphorical uses of language is mentioned once in passing in Sperber & Wilson (2008: 101).

view on several grounds: (a) the concept theory cannot do justice to the sensory character of the image (such features as its colour, shape, or texture, for instance, that we ‘see’ with our mind’s ‘eye’), (b) related to this, concepts and images have very different relations to percepts, and (c) it is (he claims) not possible to imagine an object while actually seeing it (that is, to simultaneously have a percept and an image whose content is the same), but it is quite possible (a frequent occurrence, in fact) to conceptually categorise an object that one is perceiving, from which it follows that image and concept cannot be identical (ibid: 38). He concludes that images are a distinctive type of mental phenomenon ‘and should be added as a third great category of intentionality to the twin pillars of perception and cognition’ (ibid: 39).²⁴

A strand of work in current psycholinguistics presents empirical evidence that, even in comprehending perfectly ordinary, literal language, people inevitably, immediately and seemingly without much awareness token mental images. In a series of experiments, Rolf Zwaan and colleagues presented sentences such as ‘There was an eagle in the sky’ and ‘There was an eagle in its nest’ and, importantly, also their negative counterparts (‘There was no eagle in the sky/nest’, etc.) to participants whose immediately subsequent task was to name a picture of a bird. Those who had just heard either the positive or negative ‘eagle in the sky’ sentence responded (that is, uttered the word ‘eagle’) significantly faster to a picture of an eagle with outspread wings than to one with folded wings, and vice versa for those who had just heard one of the ‘eagle in a nest’ sentences. While an explanation for these results in concept/thought terms is not impossible, Zwaan’s view that during linguistic comprehension a mental image (or perceptual simulation, as he tends to put it) of an eagle, with wings either outspread or folded, depending on the sentence, is activated²⁵ seems highly plausible, both phenomenologically and given its further support from a range of other experiments that I can’t report here.²⁶

Suppose it is right that mental imagery is triggered by (descriptive) words quite generally and requires no particularly effortful processing, no special attention beyond that required for accessing encoded concepts, then it is there for speakers to exploit, to highlight, to induce hearers/readers to pay extra attention to, to scrutinize with their mind’s eye.²⁷ So, when reading the passage from Zoe Heller’s novel given in (16), we are very likely to form an image of a toad squatting on a human head and another of some more fantastical creature with generally less well-defined contours, but with fists and fangs, etc. By providing a literal meaning which is both persistent (it doesn’t readily give way to the composition of a succession of non-literal *ad hoc* concepts) and quite bizarre, the text calls for further, more deliberate pragmatic processing and together with that, I would suggest, comes a more attentive focus on the accompanying imagery than would standardly be given to ordinary

²⁴ Here I am indebted to Adrian Pilkington who has been pressing for greater attention within relevance theory to the issue of non-propositional effects of metaphor for quite some time and who directed me to McGinn’s book. See Pilkington (2000, 2010).

²⁵ There is a *prima facie* tension here between this talk of automatic activation of images in language comprehension and McGinn’s position that mental imaging is attention-dependent. However, this seems resolvable. First, the process of utterance comprehension, within which the images at issue arise, is itself an attention-dependent activity. Second, the encyclopaedic information associated with the concepts that words encode may well include imagistic components which are activated when the lexical concept is accessed, rather than there being a separate mental act of image-forming.

²⁶ See Zwaan et al. (2002), the references therein and subsequent empirical work by his research team. This group are advocates of an ‘embodied’ theory of language comprehension which eschews amodal (conceptual) representation, but that stance is not required by their empirical findings.

²⁷ Here I skirt round an important issue raised by McGinn (2004: chapter 5) concerning what is, in fact, the object of scrutiny by the mind’s eye. The question is whether it is the image which, like a picture in a gallery, is attended to or it is the imaged object itself that is scanned with the image playing the role of vehicle. McGinn argues for the second position.

literal language use (such as the ‘eagle’ sentences above). The images that come with the literal meaning are dynamic and morph progressively as the incoming linguistic stimulus is decoded: first, there is a (probably rather schematic) image of a toad, which develops into an image of a glistening (wet) toad on a human head, and then into an image of the toad slithering down off the head. However, the more imaginative or creative imaging activity is that of ‘seeing’ the mental state of depression as revealed in these images, of scrutinizing them for how they depict ‘depression’, which is their subject and functions as a kind of constraining title or caption.

Scrutiny of the mental images formed might play a key role in prompting thoughts (conceptual representations) about the experiences of depression and of raw unhappiness, implications that may fall within the author’s communicative intention (weak implicatures, in Sperber & Wilson’s terms). This role for images could provide an explanation for what are sometimes called ‘emergent properties’ in metaphor understanding, that is, properties that are not among those directly associated with the literal meaning of the metaphor vehicle - for instance, the (not fully verbalisable) feeling of heavy hopelessness and inertia that is typical of depression but is not a component of our encyclopaedic (conceptual) knowledge about (squatting) toads.²⁸

So far I have spoken as if mental imaging, although a general feature of language comprehension, only plays the role of prompting thoughts, including hypotheses about intended contextual implications, when the second mode of metaphor processing comes into play. However, although the slower, more consciously controlled, reflective processing of the second mode seems likely to induce more attention to its accompanying imagery, I see no reason for images not to play essentially the same role in the first processing mode, in which word meanings are adjusted to form *ad hoc* concepts descriptive of some real world property. In typical cases like ‘My lawyer is a shark’, ‘That surgeon is a butcher’, ‘He bulldozed the committee into agreement’, images of the lawyer as a shark, the surgeon as a butcher, etc. are, according to many people, phenomenologically salient (we mentally ‘see’ the surgeon raising a butcher’s cleaver over the human body on the slab, for instance) and may in these cases too be a source of some of the contextual implications which in turn shape the *ad hoc* concepts SHARK*, BUTCHER*, etc. The difference would be one of degree – of time and effort expended on mental ‘looking at’ the image.

To close this section, I want to consider briefly an interesting question for pragmatic theories such as Grice’s or Sperber & Wilson’s, namely, whether the imagistic elements of metaphor understanding can or should be thought of as components of speaker (m-intended) meaning, as falling within the author’s communicative intention. The basic level intention in Grice’s (1969) general definition of speaker meaning is an intention that the audience of the utterance produce some particular response *r*. On the face of it, this could include not only entertaining propositions (and attitudes to them) but also imagining objects or scenes. However, when he comes to give a specification of *r*, it is solely in terms of propositional attitudes, in particular believing a specific proposition or believing that the speaker holds a certain propositional attitude. Similarly, the nested intentions in terms of which ostensive communication is defined by Sperber & Wilson (1986/95: 63) depend on a notion of making facts or assumptions manifest to an addressee, where a fact or assumption is manifest to an individual only provided he is capable of mentally representing it and accepting it as at least probably true. This definition excludes images and the objects they are images of by fiat – they are just not the kind of thing that can be made manifest because they are not the kind of thing that can be evaluated for truth.

²⁸ For an attempt at a fully inferential account of some cases of emergent properties in metaphor comprehension, see Wilson & Carston (2008).

We could try to redefine ostensive communication so as to allow for communicatively intended mental images as well as propositional entities. A first thought about the additional statement needed, in parallel with the definition of a manifest assumption, would be that an image is manifest to an individual only provided that he is capable of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as sufficiently accurate. But this clearly can't be right: an image is a mental representation, not something that is to be mentally represented. It must be reformulated in terms of the manifestness of the object or scene which is the content of the image and this may indeed be feasible.

But perhaps there are independent reasons for this not being an appropriate move to try to make. It seems that images are not encoded by linguistic forms while concepts are; mentalistic accounts of word meaning tend to be given in terms of concepts or concept schemas (sometimes procedures or rules for use) rather than images. In the first instance, it is lexically encoded concepts that give access to images, perhaps stored along with other (conceptual) representations comprising encyclopaedic information about the denotations of the concepts. At the least, then, mental images are not available via language in the same way as mental concepts are and perhaps they are, for this or for other reasons, not carriers of utterance content. Rather, they are components of the mental context within which communicated contents are recovered, sometimes mere by-products of the activation mechanisms, and sometimes, as in many metaphorical uses of language, playing an instrumental role in the recovery of speaker-meant content.

At any rate, I take the more conservative position here, that imagery is not communicated but is activated or evoked when certain lexical concepts are accessed and, as well as being attended to for its own sake, may function as a source of thoughts about the metaphor topic that do fall within the author's overtly intended meaning. This is interesting because it would follow that, in some cases, the most powerful and memorable effects of a metaphor do not fall within the m-intended content at all. However, as intimated by Davidson when he talks of 'what the author of a metaphor wanted us to see' (ibid: 264), even if the speaker/writer does not (cannot?) *communicatively* intend images or their objects, she may, nevertheless, have images in her own mind associated with the thoughts she seeks to communicate and intend, albeit non-communicatively, that among the effects of her utterance on her audience will be the entertaining of images similar to her own.

6. A unitary account? A unitary phenomenon?

In some of his more conciliatory passages, Davidson says: 'For the most part I don't disagree with [certain views on] what metaphor accomplishes, except that I think it accomplishes more and that *what is additional is different in kind.*' (ibid: 246-7, my emphasis), and what he objects to is '... the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message. This theory is *false as a full account* of metaphor, ...' (ibid: 262, my emphasis). The account of metaphor presented in this paper makes imagery central and 'different in kind' from whatever conceptual content or cognitive effects are conveyed. I hope it moves us closer to a 'full account' of metaphor, at least of how metaphors are understood.

But since the account proposes two distinct processing routes for metaphors, it might seem that we have ended up, in effect, with two different kinds of metaphor. At the end of his discussion of two types of metaphor theory, the proposition theory and the image theory, and how they apply to different examples, Davies (1982) says: 'Suppose we agree that the two kinds of theory apply to two kinds of metaphor. Is it then an illusion that metaphor is a unified phenomenon? I think that it is not an illusion, for to the extent that the proposition theory

is correct it seems to be a special case of the image theory.’ His thinking is that the image theory (Davidson’s) applies quite generally, but that for the more conventional or prosaic metaphors the proposition theory (Grice/Searle’s implicature account) is adequate.

I essentially agree with Davies, but the account I’ve given here is rather more complicated in that both of the processing routes I’ve described have a place for both propositional and imagistic components, although they differ in their relative prominence in the two accounts. The first (*ad hoc* concept) route delivers an explicitly communicated (speaker-meant) propositional content while imagery is often just an incidental effect; on the second route, speaker-meant propositional content is implicated (often weakly), while the literal meaning and the imagery it evokes play a more dominant role than on the first route. However, what all cases of metaphor have in common is that the second processing route is always available - literal meaning is always there to be searched further for relevant implications about the topic and, similarly, the imagery evoked is available for further ‘looking’ and ‘noticing’.

What this implies is that, as Davies says, metaphor is a unified phenomenon, that there is a common nature shared by all instances of metaphors, from the quite conventional to the wildly creative, from simple conversational cases to extended metaphorical texts. However, it is no easy matter to characterise precisely this property of ‘metaphoricity’, which is shared by all cases and distinguishes them from both literal language and other tropes, and I do not attempt this here.²⁹

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