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Have you done your Chomsky? metonymic naming and reference

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Abstract

This paper discusses some questions encountered in research on metonymy, a common linguistic and cognitive phenomenon and an important referring mechanism. Familiarity of context and shared knowledge enable us to extend reference by naming and renaming the referent. In the light of claims by Gibbs that metonymy is a universal process of cognition, the paper considers some consequences of using metonymy in the processes of reference and naming. It will comment on the importance of metonymy in communicating attitudes of association or dissociation. Examples are taken from written and spoken language to test Gibbs' theory of poetic cognition.

1 Introduction

Metonymy is often associated with metaphor, but until the emergence of cognitive linguistics the role of metaphor as the so-called master trope of rhetoric was undisputed. According to Leech (1969), metonymy can be viewed only as a residual category containing all figures which are not clearly metaphor or synecdoche, but cognitive scientists have moved on from this to assert that metonymy is a way of thinking and conceptualising, and of grounding abstract reasoning processes. Cognitive linguists (e.g. Ortony 1979, 1993) have claimed that metaphor and metonymy are both widespread, indeed pervasive, processes which underpin many linguistic realisations. Metonymy, although often unperceived, may be as important as metaphor in this respect (Bredin 1984).

From the point of view of linguistic realisation, metonymy is based on the principle of substitution of one term for another within the same domain. This linguistic realisation was thought to be principally in the noun phrase (Henry 1971; Bredin 1984) and to have a referring function. The term was extended by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) to include a function of 'helping us to understand'. In a case of metonymic reference, more than one concept is included by implication in the referent. This is seen in a type of metonymy in which a place is named to stand for the power or other abstract concepts associated with it. 'Downing Street' can stand for the British government, 'Paris' for the fashion industry, for instance.

This brief history of changing definitions of metonymy gives rise to a number of questions. Is metonymy ever anything but a conventional means of renaming something, with the function of enhancement by means of double or multiple reference? How does metonymy differ from metaphor? What special functions can be attributed if metonymy is used instead of a synonymous literal equivalent? This paper examines some functions of metonymy in written and spoken language in the light of theoretical suggestions by Gibbs (1994) about the importance of metonymic ways of thinking. In his general theory of poetic cognition, metonymy is an universal and much-used means of cognition, different from metaphor although often closely related in use. They are 'the main mechanisms through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning' (Gibbs 1994:17). The paper questions whether it is justifiable to describe metonymy as only a means of poetic cognition, since many of its instantiations seem also to be valid in non-poetic domains.

2 Gibbs' theory of poetic cognition

The central claim made by Gibbs separates the cognitive process from its linguistic product, and categorises metonymy as a normal cognitive process, not a figure of language requiring special processes to be understood. It constitutes one of the primary ways people refer to people, events and situations and thus reflects a particular mode of thought. It is typically found in poetry and is therefore called 'poetic'. But metonymic thought underlies many kinds of reasoning and 'allows people to draw inferences about what speakers and writers mean in discourse' (Gibbs 1994:321).

This theory is developed from the cognitive linguistics of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), Lakoff & Turner (1989), and others who challenge the view that thought and language are primarily literal, claiming that figurative language is not a deviation but is part of reality. Gibbs makes a further claim that mind has an inherently poetic structure. This extends the conventional term 'poetic' beyond the formal realisation of thought in poetry to its cognitive bases. What is new about Gibbs' work is that he used empirical experiments (e.g. Gibbs 1992) to confirm a number of hypotheses about the ways in which cognitive processes and mechanisms, in particular metaphor and metonymy, are understood. People, he claims, 'can comprehend metonymic statements without having to create any new senses or meanings for those descriptions .... and may create novel senses for metonymic referential terms during the on-line processing of those innovative expressions' (1994:338-9).

Metonymy is different from metaphor because it works by a different set of principles. While metaphor is a relationship of similarity bridging two domains, metonymy is a relationship of contiguity within a single domain (Black 1979; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Ortony 1979). Metonymy has been seen as a subtype of metaphor (Genette 1972; Searle 1979) without intrinsic value. For Bredin (1984) and Jakobson (1956), on the other hand, metaphor and metonymy are opposed because metonymy is a feature of syntagmatic juxtaposition while metaphor is paradigmatically selected. Lakoff (1987) claims that metaphor works by transferring or mapping a concept from one domain on to another, while metonymy works in two ways. The first is by mapping part of a concept on to the whole, or on to another part of the same domain. The second works through the co-presence in a single domain of various related parts of that domain. In a common metaphor for calmness, the term 'oasis' is substituted for another kind of place:

(1) *The library is an oasis*

There is a distance between the domain 'library', and the domain 'oasis', so the salient attributes of one domain are transferred or mapped on to the other through a relationship of similarity — we can successfully apply the 'like' test, i.e. the isolated, refreshing quality of a library is like the refreshing qualities of an oasis in the desert. In metonymy, on the other hand, there is a clearly perceived connection between the terms which are part of a single domain. In this metonymy,

(2) *I picked up a fare*

the term 'fare' is used by a cabby to refer to the fare-paying passenger. Schiffrin (1994) analysed this noun phrase substitution as a relationship perceived between the cabby, the passenger and what the one does for the other for the money, but there is no resemblance between the persons and the money. The relationship actually resides in the co-presence of the elements within the same domain or field of experience, i.e. a taxi ride, and the substitution of one element for another. Thus, attention turns away from the nature of the metonymic process *per se* to the ways in which people understand the results of the process.

Gibbs asserts that metonymy and metaphor are poetic processes, using evidence from their occurrence in poetry and reading them not as rhetorical ornaments of style but as means of inference. Let us consider, however, some examples from non-poetic written discourse in order to demonstrate some other ways in which metonymy is used. As was pointed out by Jakobson (1956) in his bipolar theory of metaphoric and metonymic language, metonymy enables realism, exactness and detail in literary text. In Hemingway's description of the physical appearance of a hunter, a number of separate elements of the domain 'person' are co-present. The descriptive reference to the man's appearance is complete enough for him to be identified, also metonymically, as a token of his type:

> He was about middle height with sandy hair, a stubby moustache, a very red face and extremely cold blue eyes with faint white wrinkles at the corners that grooved merrily when he smiled. He smiled at her now and she looked away from his face at the way his shoulders sloped in the loose tunic he wore with the four big cartridges held in loops where the left breast pocket should have been, at his big brown hands, his old slacks, his very dirty boots and back to his red face again. She noticed where the baked red of his face stopped in a white line that marked the circle left by his Stetson hat that hung now from one of the pegs of the tent pole.
>
> (Ernest Hemingway: *The short happy life of Francis Macomber*)

Metaphor, on the other hand leaves the world of the real and the everyday for extension by means of the imagination, working on the basis of how one thing resembles another either physically or conceptually. In the next example, the Lord Chancellor, writing on the subject of constitutional reform and devolution for Scotland, ended his arguments with a metaphor which maps one domain, an old Scottish town, on to another, the constitution. Thus, elements of reference are transferred into the target domain from the source domain, and as Gibbs' theory claims, the abstract reasoning is underpinned by the process.

> Our living constitution may look untidy, but like the Wynds in the old parts of Scotland's towns it is homely, it is ours, and it has grown through our history. It may need some repair and renovation, but how much finer and closer it is to us than the soulless constitutional tower blocks with which the radical reformers would replace it. (*The Times*, 7/2/96)

These literary uses of metaphor and metonymy are seen by Gibbs to arise out of mind processes which underpin abstract thinking. He claims that many aspects of word meaning are motivated by figurative schemes of thought, but 'figurative language does not require special cognitive processes to be produced and understood' (1994:17). Assessments of motivation or recognition of the figurative element in the language are not needed in everyday language, where the terms are used spontaneously. I suggest that this is also true for the longer examples I have cited. The effects are achieved and the inferences made without the reader self-consciously analysing the text as metonymic.

Gibbs extends his account of metonymy to the character of thinking and reasoning by involving the notion of a shared context, or 'conventional' knowledge. Metonymy depends on a 'stands for' relationship between its referents: 'a thing may stand for what it is conventionally associated with' (1994:324). As Lakoff (1987) pointed out, the problem about this statement is that there are some fairly obvious constraints. Whereas we readily allow that within the domain of authorship the name 'Hemingway' may stand for his works, i.e. for what people read, we can't really allow that the name 'Mary' can stand for the cake she made within the domain of food, since no-one is going to eat Mary. So, any given instance of a referring function needs to be sanctioned by a body of beliefs encapsulated in an appropriate frame (Nunberg 1979). The frame is created by a wider convention than simply physical juxtaposition. Instead, a conceptualisation is activated with the result of shortening the process of abstract thinking.

A test for the theory is the use of conceptual anaphors, i.e. the use of an anaphoric pronoun which refers to the intended referent rather than the grammatically correct one (synesis), as is shown in this example analysed by Nunberg as a referring function:

(3) *The ham sandwich wants his check*

The implication that 'the ham sandwich' refers not to an object but to its user is confirmed by the synectic anaphor 'his' rather than the grammatically correct 'its'. The extensive use of synesis in anaphors avoids ambiguities of interpretation. According to psycholinguistic experiments, such as those of Gernsbacher (1991), readers take less time to process the conceptual anaphor than they do to process the grammatically correct anaphor if the context is known, because the metonymy allows the singular anaphor to stand for a conceptual set. Gibbs concludes 'that 'illegal' pronouns are naturally and easily understood precisely because of our pervasive ability to think metonymically about various people, places, events and objects' (1994:329).

If this is correct, it might be true of all examples of this type where in the noun phrase a renaming process has extended the referents of an expression. Let us consider a scenario where the frame may be defined as co-attendance at a course. Two students exchange the following (J. Cutting, personal communication):

(4) A: *Have you done your Chomsky?*
B: *Yes, I finished it last night.*

It is not acceptable for B to say 'yes I finished him last night' because the name Chomsky refers not only to the famous linguist, but to his works and to assignments set on them. The metonymic substitution, driven by contextual expectations, shortens comprehension time because of the knowledge shared between the speakers. But calling this ability to think in terms of the part for the whole a 'poetic' mind-set seems to be a very strong claim unless we stretch the definition of poetry to include any figurative use of language.

3 Metonymic communication of attitudes

Familiarity of context enables extension of references, whether poetic or not, by renaming the referent. Assuming that figurative language would not be used unless the speaker wished to convey some kind of attitude in addition to the propositional content of the utterance, the question is whether metonymic substitution in the process of reference enables the hearer to infer significant but covert implicatures.

The next examples are typical of some current uses of metonymic reference in the communication of attitudes. The first one associates two conceptualisations: a great scientist, and a television documentary about him.

(5) Andrew Sachs plays the Great Cardigan himself. (*The Times*, 18/3/96)

The referent is Albert Einstein, who liked to wear a cardigan, an image which is essentially metonymic since it uses the substitution of the article of clothing for the wearer. It carries the implicature that the wearer is soft, warm, unfrightening, comfortable to be with, scruffy, not awe-inspiring. This seems however to contradict the other image of Einstein as the powerful brain, the great physicist, the Nobel Prize winner, almost mythically powerful in the domain of scientific discovery. The writer's insertion of the attribute 'Great' and use of capitals makes quite clear his ironic intention. Metonymy is being used in a fairly obvious way to induce humour. By doing this it dissociates the powerful image of the physicist from the name 'Einstein', with a view to persuading the viewer that the man was accessible and friendly. Thus, the metonymic renaming enables the reader to infer a number of attitudes on the part of the writer, such as dissociation from conventional image-building.

A second example is less clear, because understanding of the inferred attitudes depends on knowledge of a special contextual frame.

(6) *The police are going to work on his alibi*

At first sight this seems to be a literal statement since an alibi is a story which the police will want to investigate for its truth. In fact the referent is the person who gave the alibi, so the statement acquires a more sinister implicature. How does the hearer know that an attitudinal factor is involved? Understanding is blocked unless the hearer knows the linguistic conventions of police investigation. The attitude inferable is one of scepticism. The speaker seems to disbelieve the alibi and suspects that the person who told it may be lying.

The communication of attitudes by inferential processes is not confined to irony, doubt or disbelief, as the next example, an advertising slogan for Mercedes-Benz cars, shows.

(7) *Would you call a Picasso second-hand?*

The metonymic 'a Picasso' refers not only to a picture but, obliquely, to the high value placed by art critics, and at auction sales, on the work of this artist. By extension of the domain, buying a second-hand, highly-priced Mercedes car is associated with buying a work of art. The metonymy conveys a number of attitudes towards both — admiration for the object created and for the creators, association with the idea that valuable things need not be new, a wish to change conventional ideas about used cars.

4 Conclusions

Gibbs claims persuasively that metonymy is a fundamental thought process with linguistic realisations. From the examples considered in this paper, it is doubtful that it is uniquely poetic, since it occurs in non-poetic contexts. The ease with which agrammatical anaphors are understood is evidence that metonymic reference is an easily understood linguistic short cut. If a speaker uses metonymy where he might otherwise have used literal equivalents, it is because he wished to convey an attitude to the referent. But the claim that these processes are universal has yet to be tested experimentally, and is a subject for further research.

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The texts analysed in this paper are drawn from:

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