

## Entertaining Metaphors

John Austin (1962) criticized the philosophical assumption, "...that to say something, at least in all cases worth considering, i.e. all cases considered, is always and simply to *state* something" (12). He pointed out that philosophers of language were disproportionately concerned with fact-stating language, convinced that, "...the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs...which it must do either truly or falsely" (1). The business of a 'statement' to which Austin referred is, more precisely, business a speaker performs with an utterance. Describing a state of affairs always involves predicating a property (P) to something (X) to which one has referred. This is a *propositional act*. When such an act is performed a speaker has conveyed a *proposition*: the proposition 'that X is P.' Austin emphasized the things we do with *literal* utterances besides uttering propositions. But the bias he recognized has also led philosophers to one of two tendencies regarding metaphors: either assert that metaphors are not essentially propositional, and therefore not a proper topic for theories of language and linguistic meaning, or alternately try and save metaphors by assimilating these to the philosophically standard kinds of fact-stating, propositional sentences. Both approaches have caused philosophers to ignore important aspects of metaphorical discourse. In place of previous, simplistic models of metaphor, I defend my own model, which acknowledges the propositional nature of metaphor while emphasizing that what makes metaphor special is a unique relation between its propositional and non-propositional aspects.

After motivating my project in chapter one, I discuss—in the largely negative first half of the dissertation—several theories of metaphor that fall on either side of the distinction between philosophical approaches. I ultimately reject Non-Cognitivism (NC), which, in claiming sentences have only literal meanings, denies that metaphors are essentially propositional. As I show in chapter two, the standard version of NC is beset with a number of difficulties. In chapter three I go on to show that paraphrases of metaphors are not less adequate than paraphrases of literal sentences, as arguments for NC require. In chapter four I examine the Pragmatic Approach (PA) to metaphor. PA contends that when the meaning of a metaphorical utterance such as, "Richard is a lion," is understood to be literally false (or otherwise inappropriate), we calculate—via certain principles of communication—the propositional implication that

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'Richard is brave and fierce'. But I present examples of metaphorical meanings that cannot be calculated according to the principles of communication PA posits. In chapter five I discuss Relevance Theory (RT), which in reconceptualizing the traditional view of *literal* communication and utterance meaning also offers a deflationary approach to metaphor. Although I borrow much from RT, the theory's standard approach is rejected because it denies the substantive distinction between the metaphorical and the literal to which I am committed.

Building on RT, I contend, in the second, positive part of the dissertation, that recovering propositional meanings from utterances requires more than simply combining decoded word meanings. In a first phase of linguistic understanding, the words uttered are decoded and combined, but this supplies only the RT version of a *logical form*—a group of non-propositional, conceptual hints. Next hearers infer conveyed propositions based on context. Hearers may loosen and/or tighten elements of the logical form to derive the specific propositions that are meant by the speaker and available to the hearer. When, "Your tire is flat," is said of a tire which is merely low, ideas of tires and flatness are triggered, but some degree of loosening is involved in understanding what the speaker means by this utterance. The dictionary definition of flatness is loosened to include the idea of things which are merely deflated. Likewise, we tighten the dictionary definition of bravery to derive the meaning of, "Anyone who stays now is brave," said on the twelfth day of the siege of the Alamo. The hearer must tighten the concept to include only the bravest of the brave, and exclude those of only commonplace valor. Such inferential processes deliver the first communicated propositions—enrichments of (non-trivial) elements of the logical form decoded from an utterance. In RT lingo, these are *explicatures*. An utterance may communicate other propositions. If my dad says, "Your tire is flat," I understand his explicature to be, 'Your tire is low,' but I will also understand him as implying, 'You need to take better care of your car,' given that I know my dad's opinion of the way I treat things I own. Such additional communicated propositions, inferred from explicatures and background information, are *implicatures*.

I have discussed acts of conveying propositions, but there are other *speech acts*, or acts we perform in uttering words. If we are sitting around a campfire and I say, "This spot is where the escaped

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convict murdered the three coeds,” I have conveyed a proposition, but, depending on the circumstances, I may have also made an assertion and/or frightened my audience. Asserting is what is known as an *illocutionary act*, whereas frightening is a *perlocutionary act*. Illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are differentiated in terms of their characteristic aims. The aim of a perlocutionary act is to effect certain extra-linguistic, psychological responses on the part of a hearer. In the case of frightening, an emotional response is sought. But, though illocutionary acts may require psychological responses on the part of an audience, their characteristic *aims* are not psychological responses. The aim of an act of asserting, for example, is to state something true. Besides asserting, illocutions include acts of *asking, denying, warning, promising, requesting, advising, sentencing*, and many more. Frightening and *surprising, informing, amusing, insulting, inspiring, teaching, inciting* and *confusing* are among the perlocutionary acts.

More than one speech act can be performed at a time. By uttering the words I did beside the campfire, I might have performed the illocutionary act of asserting that the murders occurred here, the perlocutionary act of frightening my audience, and, in order to do both these things, conveyed a proposition (so performed a propositional act). Important relations obtain between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts on the one hand and the propositions conveyed in propositional acts on the other. We might ask what I asserted beside the campfire, and what I thought might frighten my audience? In this case it would be appropriate to respond with a single conveyed proposition: ‘Roughly this area is where an escaped prisoner killed three female college students,’ that’s what I asserted and what I thought might frighten my audience. But by means of a single utterance one might also perform an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act that relate to different conveyed propositions. My dad might claim that my tire is low and, by means of the same utterance, intentionally offend me by implying that I need to take better care of my car. Here the claim relates to an explicature and the offensive act to an implicature conveyed in the utterance. However an explicature is just an enrichment of a logical form. More than one logical form might be encoded in an utterance, as in the case of puns. And more than one enrichment of a single logical form is sometimes possible, as in the case of paraprosookian utterances, in which the latter part of

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the utterance causes us to reframe the first part. Since a single utterance can convey two explicatures, it is possible that an illocutionary act performed in an utterance might relate to one explicature conveyed in the utterance while a perlocutionary act performed in the same utterance relates to a different explicature conveyed in the same utterance. According to my theory, this actually happens, and when it does, we have a *metaphor*.

Consider an example. Emily Dickinson wrote that, “Hope is the thing with feathers.” This line conveys a logical form, triggering ideas of hope and of a feathered thing. This logical form can be enriched in a variety of ways. In relevant contexts, we focus on the fragility of a feathered thing, and the idea of a feathered thing is loosened to include all fragile things. We thus understand Dickinson’s intended claim, that ‘Hope is one of the fragile things.’ But Dickinson did not only make a claim with her line. She also aimed to affect her readers in certain ways. A feathered thing is not only delicate but also tangible. Recalling this (indeed, pushed to do so by the next few lines of the poem) we focus on the tangibility of a feathered thing and are comforted by the generated explicature that, ‘Hope is one of the tangible things.’ Dickinson’s line performs a dual function of claiming a certain explicature and of comforting us with a certain distinct explicature. The explicatures associated with the illocutionary act of claiming and the perlocutionary act of comforting are distinct enrichments of a logical form encoded in the utterance. According to my account, Dickinson’s line is a metaphor.

In Dickinson’s line the illocutionary act is one of claiming. But we can perform lots of other illocutionary acts, and sometimes we perform these in the making of a metaphor. In the course of asking a question, one can produce a metaphor. John Donne might have done this had he asked (instead of stated) “Is no man an island?” An island is a thing that exists in isolation and in a wide range of contexts the concept would be loosened to include all things that exist in isolation. The explicit question would be ‘Is any man among the things that exist in isolation?’ Entertaining the metaphor, we might come to restrict the concept another way and so be amused at the independent, explicit question, ‘Is any man the partially exposed tip of a submerged mountain, existing in the middle of the ocean, with a palm tree

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growing out of him, and a lonely castaway sitting under it?’<sup>1</sup> If Donne had uttered a sentence of that form, intending that it be so entertained, he would have uttered a metaphor. A judge might sentence a prisoner metaphorically. Saying, “Your ass will fry,” the explicature related to the sentencing is, ‘You will be put to death.’ But the explicature, ‘You will be cooked in oil,’ is what horrifies the audience.

In uttering a metaphor a speaker may perform a variety of kinds of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Furthermore, the explicit propositions to which these relate may be generated by loosening the concepts constitutive of an encoded logical form, as in the cases discussed above, but less often the explicatures involved are reached by a process of tightening. Consider, “He’s no tiger,” said of the crest-fallen circus tiger at the end of a rusty chain. A concept conveyed in the logical form of this utterance, that of a particular kind of great cat, is here restricted to generate what the speaker really claims. She is claiming, ‘That particular tiger is not fierce, proud, or otherwise tiger-like.’ But, we are surprised at the idea that, ‘That particular tiger is not a member of the species *panthera tigris*.’

In metaphors the illocutionary act performed relates to one explicature conveyed by the utterance and the perlocutionary act relates to another. But what, then, are literal sentences? Since I am construing metaphor broadly—as identical to the figurative—specifying the literal will exhaust the kinds of utterances. The specification can be summarized briefly: Literal sentences are not metaphors. That is, in the case of literal sentences it is not the case that the illocutionary act performed relates to one explicature conveyed by the utterance and the perlocutionary act relates to another. There are lots of ways a sentence might succeed at being literal (or fail to be metaphorical). In the case of soliloquy, one might be making claims (for example) with no concern to effect any audience in any way. In such a case, one performs only illocutionary acts. Therefore, one utters no metaphors; one utters literal sentences.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, one might perform only perlocutionary acts and no illocutionary acts, if one’s aim is only to affect one’s

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this image from a Gary Larson, The Far Side, cartoon.

<sup>2</sup> Dramatic soliloquies, such as those employed by Shakespeare, present a special case. Some such cases constitute metaphors, but this is due to Shakespeare’s intention to affect his audience, not to the intentions of his characters.

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readers, as it might be in the case of some sound (or, more pejoratively, nonsense) poetry.<sup>3</sup> Another kind of literal language is exemplified in the transaction of business and other staid affairs. In such instances, one is often concerned only to make claims and to inform his audience of the content of those claims. I might say, “My passport...,” claiming, ‘Here is my passport,’ and informing the customs officer, ‘Here is my passport.’ Here we have illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, but because those relate to the same proposition, no metaphor. Furthermore, there are literal cases such as that involving my dad’s comments about my tire in which an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act relate to distinct propositions conveyed by means of the same utterance, but one (or more) proposition is an implicature. There are artistic cases of writing and speech where an author intends to perform an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act with different contents, but does not thereby utter a metaphor. Consider the utterance, “Now Beowulf bode in the burg of the Scyldings; Leader beloved, and long he ruled.” It would seem that the author here intends to inform us that, ‘Beowulf lived amongst, and was a long standing ruler of, the Scyldings, who greatly admired him.’ But she aims to affect us not with some propositional act, but rather by the sound of the utterance. The perlocutionary aim is to entertain, by means of the alliterative word play. Such an utterance is non-figurative. Finally, there are utterances such as some puns, in which the aim is to make two claims. Imagine someone reciting a story. She says, “When they arrived, the peasants were sick, wet, and tired. They and their pack animals passed out right away in a few shabby outbuildings at the back of the estate: Two horse to a mews.” The *vocal* pronunciation of the last sentence of this utterance is ambiguous between two logical forms. One involves conceptual hints about pack animals and barns, the other about sore throats and jokes. In the context of the story, these logical forms are candidates for enrichment to two explicatures: ‘The horses were housed two to a small stable,’ and, ‘The peasants’ voices were too raspy to allow them to entertain one another.’ Furthermore, these propositions might both be intended by the speaker. But, generally, the perlocutionary aim in such cases is to amuse the audience at the ambiguity of the utterance, not at some proposition or other. Such a

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<sup>3</sup> It may be controversial that my theory counts such language as literal, not figurative, language. In my dissertation, I explain why this approach makes sense.

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perlocutionary aim, as in standard cases of alliteration, is non-propositional, so the pun is not a metaphor. But a pun might be a metaphor, as might, “Two horse to a mews,” if the context allowed and the speakers intent was to inform that, ‘The horses were housed two to a small stable,’ but to amuse that, ‘The peasants’ voices were too raspy to allow them to entertain one another.’ Some puns are metaphors. But others are literal.

In my dissertation, I will consider many more examples of metaphorical and literal language. In the case of each metaphor, considerations of the author’s intentions to entertain and our process of entertaining her utterance will be important.

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