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# METAPHOR AS A TERM-COINING DEVICE

## I

Metaphor is the most common way of introducing new terms into language. The general terms thus introduced share no semantic idiosyncracies peculiar to them as a class: they are endowed with no distinctive sort of metaphorical meaning neither is the meaning of the metaphorical phrase the result of some singular interaction of its constituent parts. As in the literal case, term-meaning is detemined by the stereotype assigned to the term — a set of conditions, to be characterised in the sequel, satisfied by the typical or normal instances of the term; while the contribution of a metaphorical term to the meaning of a sentence is governed by the same rules as apply in the corresponding literal case. The only oddity distinctive of metaphor is pragmatic and is to be found in the manner in which stereotype is assigned to term sign: whereas in the literal case the allocation is conventional and immediate, in the metaphorical case it is mediated by contextual factors.

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The virtue of this conception of metaphor lies in the uniform treatment accorded literal and metaphorical language, which alone can account for the existence of dead metaphor. Dead metaphor is semantically indistinguishable from literal language: it is only by appeal to historical considerations, if at all, that a claim as to the metaphorical or literal character of some sense of an ambiguous term can be staked. Consider the term 'gold'. Is the substance-term derivative on the colour-term or vice versa? Which is the metaphorical sense, which the literal one? Are there any semantic grounds on the basis of which either claim could be settled? Or is the only relevant consideration that of temporal priority?[1]

Moreover, consider live metaphor. How do we recognise that it obtains? Is there any semantic feature that marks it off from literal idiom? "Metaphor is meaningless or blatantly contradictory when construed literally." Quite. But this answer merely deflects the burden of the problem to the literal alternative: how do we recognise literal talk? Is there any semantic trait that marks it off from metaphor? Insofar as the production of nonsense is concerned they are both on a par: a metaphorical construal of literal language often results in nonsense. Substitute the metaphorical sense of 'saw' (as in 'She saw the truth') for its literal sense in 'She saw the tree' and consider the ensuing nonsense. In general, when one selects the "wrong" — whether metaphorical or literal — sense of an ambiguous term one is likely to end up with a senseless construction. The production of nonsense, then, is in no way distinctive of either literal or metaphorical idiom.

Likewise, the fact that we cannot often precisely articulate the meaning of metaphorical terms is not solely the prerogative of metaphor: we are just as inarticulate on the meaning of most literal terms. In this again metaphorical language is at one with its literal counterpart.[2]

But there is no reason to persist in the search for a semantic distinction between live metaphor and literal language. Pragmatic distinctions — on the lines of those marking off dead metaphor — serve just as well. Literal language is branded by custom, temporal precedence, learning processes and suchlike factors, to which it owes its psychological ascendancy over metaphorical talk. A uniform approach to metaphorical and literal idiom, thus, seems indicated and its success would be the best argument for this view. The one suggested here is intrinsically bound up with a particular realist account of general terms, central to which is the idea of a real essence.[3] The following is only a sketchy summary of it, the aim being general comprehension of the position represented rather than detailed substantiation.

## II

The concept of an essence employed derives from and is an extension to other categories — sortal or not[4] — of Locke's concept of the real essence of substances. According to Locke a real essence is "the real internal, but generally (in substances) unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities *depend*"[5]. The real essence of gold, for instance, is "the real constitution of its insensible parts, on which *depend* all these properties of colour, weight, fusibility, fixedness, etc., which are to be found in it"[6].

On this conception, then, essential properties determine contingent ones, and the pre-eminent problem encountered in making sense of and extending it, is to find a way of reconciling the dependence on a real essense of contingent properties, with the invariance of the former and the variability of the latter: water always has the same microscopic constitution, although it may at times be liquid and transparent and at times opaque and solid.

A line to a solution, interesting in its own right since it ties up the semantic with matters of knowledge, is through the cognitive notion of observable evidence for theory — in the relational senses of the terms[7]. The connecting link is that observable evidence $E_1, \ldots, E_n$ for theoretical X varies with the obtaining circumstances although X remains constant. The parallelism with the invariance of essences and the variability of contingent properties is striking. Essential properties remain constant under all circumstantial variation, contingent ones vary with changes in the obtaining circumstances. Water always has the microscopic constitution $H_2O$, although under certain conditions of temperature and pressure it is opaque, whitish and solid, while under others it is transparent, colourless and liquid.

One is thereby led to the idea that contingent properties constitute observable evidence, under the obtaining circumstances, for essential ones, which are theoretical constructs posited to account for these data. On this view, then, the ontological relation of dependence between the two is any relation obtaining between X and E that justifies the attribution of the relational predicate 'is observable evidence for theoretical X' to E. Primarily, but possibly not only, the causal relation. However, because the concept of causality is eminently in need of clarification; because opinion diverges as to the exact nature of the metaphysical relation obtaining between various sorts of relevant phenomena, such as intention and action, function and organ; in effect, because it

is not clear that the causal relation is the only one that justifies such attributions, we shall refer to this ontological relation indiscriminately as the relation that obtains between a theoretical property and its manifestations — disregarding the cognitive overtones of the terminology.

We shall, accordingly, consider the real essence of an individual *qua* P (e.g., a bronze vase *qua* vase, a bronze vase *qua* bronze, etc.) to be the theoretical property that manifests itself in the contingent properties of the individual, under the obtaining circumstances. A property, moreover, for which the latter constitute relatively observable evidence, given these circumstances.

On this reading, then, the real essence of a substance is its microscopic constitution: it is theoretical in relation to its macroscopic traits, which, in turn, are its manifestations and constitute observable evidence for it under the obtaining circumstances. The genes of an animate being animal or plant — constitute its real essence: they are theoretical entities explanatory of its phenotypical traits, which both constitute evidence for them and are their manifestations under the given circumstances. The mean kinetic energy of the molecules of an individual is essential to the individual, *qua* bearer of temperature — i.e., *qua* hot, cold, warm, 33°C, etc.: it is a theoretical property for which volume expansions of mercury and alcohol and thermal sensory stimuli constitute evidence and are its manifestations under the obtaining circumstances. The function of an artefact and of an organ of an animate being is essential to it: the artefact, the organ, constitutes evidence for its function which is eminently theoretical. The intention with which an action is performed is an essential property of the action, the action itself being a manifestation of this intention and constituting observable evidence for it[8] under the obtaining circumstances[9]. Finally, sensation or feeling is essential to mental state, the ensuing behaviour being both its manifestation and constituting relatively observable evidence[10] for it, under the relevant circumstances.

It should be noted that on our construal of real essences it is not always the case that every non-essential property is also contingent; not every such property constitutes evidence for and is a manifestation of the relevant essential ones. The question then is, which are and how are they determined. Our specification so far has been circular: contingent properties are the manifestations of and constitute evidence for essential ones, and essential properties are these properties explanatory of contingent ones. The problem is further aggravated by the fact that what is essential and what contingent to an individual varies with the

category adopted. This, however, does point to essences being language-dependent. And in fact, as will emerge, both essential and contingent properties are linguistically determined and the relevant modalities *de dicto* rather than *de re* — although not in the usual obvious sense.[11]

## III

We shall consider a class N of individuals to be natural just in case all and only its members share the same essential property P; i.e., a property that is theoretical in relation to certain others of their properties, that constitute observable evidence for it and are its manifestations under the prevailing circumstances. The property P, then, will be called the general essence associated with the class N and with any general term co-extensive with N.

On examination we find that the extensions of a large number of terms in natural language are either natural classes, unions of natural classes, restrictions of natural classes or restrictions of unions of natural classes.[12] By a union of natural classes, however, I do not intend any union of such classes, but a union N of natural classes $N_1, \ldots, N_m$, such that all and only the members of N are similar in respect of their essential properties, *qua* members of some $N_i$. While a restriction $R_N$ of a natural class N is a subset of N that includes all and only those members of N that are identical or similar in respect of one or more of their contingent properties, *qua* members of N. The extension of the term 'water', e.g., is a natural class since all and only samples of water have the same microscopic constitution $H_2O$. The extension of the term 'ice', however, is a restriction of a natural class since anything that is ice has the microscopic constitution $H_2O$ and also the contingent properties of solidity, opacity, etc. And again, the extension of the term 'exactly 34°C' is a natural class, while the extension of the term 'warm' is a union of natural classes. For the molecules of all and only the instances of the former term have an identical determinate mean kinetic energy, whereas the mean kinetic energy of the instances of the latter term is indeterminate, these individuals being merely similar in respect of it.

A stereotype S associated with a class N, of one of the sorts specified above, is a set of conditions, a representation, that characterises the contingent properties of the normal or typical members of N. In effect, it specifies what counts as evidence under normal circumstances for the property that is the general essence associated with N. Alternatively, it characterises the manifestations of this property under the said circum-

stances. The terms 'normal' and 'typical' should be understood in their relational senses. Circumstances and individuals are not normal or abnormal, typical or atypical, *per se*. They are so only in relation to some community, cultural or linguistic. What is considered normal or typical by a community depends on the community's interests, goals, ideals, achievements, and also on its frequency of occurrence in that community.

Given a stereotype S for a class N, the general essence associated with N is fixed: it is that property or properties whose manifestations, under normal circumstances, the stereotypical properties are. It is also that theoretical property or properties for which stereotypical properties constitute observable evidence, under normal circumstances. And to that extent, stereotypes also provide a cognitive route to essence.[13]

The idea, then, suggests itself that we, by and large, classify by essential properties, that contingent properties are used in evidence of essential ones and that stereotypes serve to fix the meaning or truth-criteria of terms, i.e. the relevant general essences. Stereotypes serve to introduce general terms into language — and especially commonsense ones — and provide an identifying link between our uses of a term, as these vary over time with changes in our pertinent knowledge and theories. The proposed realist account of general terms, then, runs as follows. We hold an individual x to be P iff x has the same theoretical property or properties $E_P$ as the properties that, under normal circumstances, manifest themselves in the stereotypical properties associated with 'P'; and in certain cases — namely, when the extension of 'P' is a restriction of a natural class or of a union of such classes — only if, in addition, x has the stereotypical properties associated with 'P'.

For example, we consider anything, whether an ice-cube or steam, to be water that has the property that is responsible for the contingent traits of normal — i.e., liquid, transparent, tasteless, odourless, etc. — water: water under normal circumstances. And if we were to discover that the property responsible for these traits is not the microscopic constitution $H_2O$, but some other property Q, then we would hold that ice-cubes are not water, were the property responsible for their contingent traits, *qua* substance, the microscopic constitution $H_2O$. And again, we consider anything to be ice that has the stereotypical properties of ice (solidity, opacity, etc.) and also the theoretical property responsible for them. It is, thus, a contingent matter that pieces of ice are specimens of water; while it is a matter of convention (interest, expedience, etc.) that we use the term 'water' for the members of a natural class, whereas we reserve the term 'ice' for the members of a restriction of this natural class.[14]

Or consider the term 'angry'. We hold that a person is angry just in case he has the property that is responsible for behaviour that we consider typical of anger: behaviour that is a manifestation of anger under normal circumstances. Were we to discover that this property is not the property responsible for what has been, hitherto, held by us to be anger-behaviour in some unfamiliar culture, we would no longer attribute anger to those people on the evidence of this sort of behaviour. Were we, however, to discover that the property responsible for behaviour typical of anger in our community, is other than what it was hitherto believed to be,[15] we would continue to attribute anger to an individual in our community, on the evidence of this typical anger-behaviour.

On this view, then, general terms are not usually attached to given criteria, but to these properties, *whatever they may be*, that under normal circumstances stand in a causal or other appropriate relation to stereotypical properties. Meaning is not in the head, although it is determined by what is in the head: whereas the assignment of stereotypes to terms is conventional, the allocation of truth-criteria is only mediately conventional. What the truth-criteria of a general term are, depends both on our intentions and on the world.

## IV

How does all this tie up with metaphor? Metaphor, we suggested, is a term-coining device. A consequence of the indicated account of general terms is that one may assign meaning to a general term by associating a stereotype with it. One need not assign truth-criteria in order to endow a term with meaning; one need only allot a stereotype to it. Metaphor, then, introduces new terms into language by associating novel stereotypes with old term-signs. And it does so by trading on the connotations of the literal and of the more familiar metaphorical senses of the term. While the categorization of the term being introduced is contextually achieved.

It is a commonplace that a general term apart from its meaning has various psycho-culturally determined connotations. These either spring to mind directly on confrontation or are brought out — or suppressed — by context. For example, the term 'wolf' apart from signifying animals of a certain species, commonly connotes a sheep-snatching, pack-roaming individual. However, depending on context, it may also connote the wolf-mother of Romulus and Remus, tending the two infants in a cave. Such connotations constitute the stereotypes that fix the truth-

criteria, i.e. the general essences, of the terms being introduced. Since connotations represent properties they are eminently suitable as stereotypes, and, in addition, serve to identify the paradigmatic or typical instances of the term being introduced: they are these items that, under the relevant normal circumstances — likewise indicated by context —, have the connoted properties.

I will not even begin to examine how context conspires with the relevant term to bring out connotation, allusion, association. It is well known that it does — as is amply attested by the genre of literary interpretation directed to spelling these out. Neither will I discuss how context determines category: the category of a metaphorical term is contextually determined in the same uncharted way in which the category of a multivocal "literal" term often is. (Consider 'He is basically a good man' and 'They are good apples'.) I will proceed, instead, to some instances of metaphor, indicating how, on my account, they are to be construed. After which, I shall attempt to forestall certain objections to the view advanced, by pointing out various relevant factors that may be being overlooked.

The hackneyed metaphor 'Man is a wolf' trades on the commonplace connotation of 'wolf'. It attributes to man an ethic of which typical wolf-behaviour is a manifestation, under lupine circumstances of course. On another occasion, however, and in a suitable context, 'Man is a wolf' may signify that, contrary to what is commonly supposed, man has a disposition towards tender, maternal feelings, as manifested in the behaviour of Romulus und Remus' foster mother.

The metaphor 'He saw red' attributes to the subject of the sentence the feelings and sensations that manifest themselves in the charging behaviour of bulls in bull-rings, feelings commonly believed to be caused by the sight of red. It is not similarity of behaviour that is being claimed but identity of feeling — inasmuch as feeling is considered to be responsible for behaviour. In support of this interpretation is the fact that it is not contradictory to say 'He saw red, but managed to control himself'; that is, although he saw red, he did not behave like a bull. If similarity of behaviour were being asserted, then, seeing red would be tantamount to behaving in a bull-like way and the above statement contradictory.

Paraphrasing Shakespeare,[16] we may point out someone as "that fawning publican over there", thereby attributing to him an action identical in intention to that of a publican's servile reception of his potential clients. What is being attributed is neither mere movement nor mere

intention similar or identical to the publican's, but an action — movement performed with a certain intention — identical to the publican's.

In Keats' *The Eve of St. Agnes* the hero says that he will beard his foes "though they be more fang'd than wolves and bears"[17]. One of the things he is claiming[18] is that he will beard his foes even if they are armed to the hilt with weapons whose function is identical to that of wolves' and bears' fangs: weapons used to ward off intruders by stabbing, piercing, tearing at their flesh. Note that there is no "literal" expression available in English with which to convey precisely this idea; as there is no general term denoting such weapons: 'sword', 'dagger', 'knife', 'stiletto', 'sabre', 'cutlass', 'rapier', 'scimitar', etc., denote far too narrow a range of weapons; while 'arms', 'small arms' and 'side arms' are far too general. Note, in addition, that what is connoted is not a function but, at the most, an instance of use of the relevant weapons, the function being merely elicited from this connotation.

It may be objected, against this account of metaphor, that given a stereotype alone — plus some indication of the normal circumstances — there is no possibility of a theory getting off the ground; in consequence of which dead metaphor rests unexplained, while live metaphorical terms are only skeletal parodies of fullbodied literal ones. I would agree, were stereotypes allocated in a cognitive and linguistic void. Metaphor, however, introduces new terms into language. It does not generate a language *ab initio*. There is, ready to hand, a whole categorial framework within which the new term is to be integrated. As there is a whole body of knowledge to hint at, direct and enframe the new theory. The discovery of the essential properties of water took ages to achieve, whereas the discovery of the microscopic constitution of some new substance is an easy enough matter, now that there is a unified general theory of chemical substances at hand — whether true or false is irrelevant.[19]

In addition the following considerations should be taken into account in appraising my, or any, approach to metaphor. First, is the fact that metaphor, like literal talk, may be true or false. 'Man is a wolf' is a false statement. All men do not have the morals of the typical wolf. Some men do. Most men, depending on the epoch, might. But all men, as a matter of fact, don't. Just as all men are not idiots, no matter how often we might be led to exclaim that they are. Likewise, commonsense tells us that were someone's forehead the colour of "an ample field of snow"[20] he would have looked ghastly — which is not what the poet intends to convey. Metaphor, when not downright false, often partakes of hyper-

bole and should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt - - as should a lot of literal talk.

This brings us to a second point. Namely, that one of the reasons why metaphor seems unduly difficult to construe is that we often consciously engage with literary metaphor: metaphor in poetic and other literary contexts. But in such contexts metaphor occurs simultaneously with a number of other figures of speech. So that the task of unravelling the meaning of a sentence and according each constituent component its due is stupendous. Metaphor may, thus, be made to bear more than its fair share of the burden.

Finally, this is further compounded by the inherent ambiguity of metaphor. The connotations of a term are numerous. Any one or more of them can be used to coin a new term.[21] Context does not always single out one of them, and there is no reason why it always should. Plurality of meaning is a virtue not a crime. If for no other reason than that it makes for compactness. It is thus that poetry, taking advantage of metaphor, operates on many "levels". And it is thus that the word-with-the-right-connotations is accorded its semantic and cognitive due.[22] Every term in virtue of its connotations is a budding metaphor. And every phrase, by this reason, has multiple meaning. The aim is to be correct on all counts. But that is stretching a point too far: context suppresses as well as evokes connotation. Many sentences are, thus, intentionally univocal.

To revert to metaphor however, it is dead or live but hackneyed metaphor that is preponderantly univocal, to the extent that literal language is: one of its senses predominates over all others. For such metaphor has been used in such a variety of circumstances that its meaning has been narrowed down to the point where metaphor can operate out of context: the link between stereotype and term-sign is as nearly immediate and conventional as makes no difference.[23]

**Notes and References**

1. I owe this example to Peter Meloney.

2. Any residual difficulties in the case of metaphor are explained by the considerations advanced on p. 116.

3. Based on research for a doctoral dissertation to be submitted at the University of London under the title *Conceptual Classification and Empi-*

*rical Knowledge: Semantic Implications*. My general debt to Kripke's and Putnam's work on the semantics of natural language should be evident.

4. Accordingly, a particular golden ring has a real essence not only *qua* gold or *qua* ring, but also *qua* gold-coloured, ring-shaped, hot, cold, etc. Although the concept of a real essence is primarily a metaphysical one, my concern is with the semantic rather than the metaphysical, so that my extension of the concept to non-sortal realms acquires both point and is explained. My object is to discern some common taxonomic pattern and to inquire into the conditions of predicate identity, not to engage with metaphysical questions concerning the identity of individuals. The germs of a pattern are to be found in Locke's concept of the real essence of substances. In fact, with suitable elaborations, this provides me with the exact model required.

5. Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Alexander C. Fraser edition (1959), book III, chapter iii, section 15 — my italics.

6. *Ibid.*, book III, chapter iii, section 18 — my italics.

7. As advocated by Mary Hesse, for example, in *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (1974), chapter 1. On this view a property is observable or theoretical only in relation to some theory. A theory explains the occurrence of certain phenomena whose existence is assumed and used as evidence for the theory. The assumed data are observable, the explanatory phenomena theoretical. In effect, whether X is observable or theoretical depends on its position in some particular theory: it is then theoretical only in relation to the other phenomena treated by the theory as observable and vice versa.

8. This is certainly true insofar as the intentions and sensations of other persons are concerned. Whether we use our own behaviour as evidence for our own sensations and intentions is not clear, pending investigation into the nature of sensation and intention; but more to the point, pending investigation into the nature of the factors responsible for action and behaviour: are these, for instance, phenomenal or neurophysical? In fact, I use the terms 'intention' and 'sensation' as dummy terms, with intuitive appeal, for whatever it is that is responsible for action and behaviour.

9. What circumstances are relevant differ from category to category of term and are subject to empirical determination. Temperature and pressure are relevant to substances, hormonal and nutritional factors to natural kinds, character traits and social norms to mental state, etc.

10. See n. 8 above.

11. See Mackie, J. L., *Problems from Locke* (1976), pp. 96, 153 - 159, for a discussion of the point.

12. This cannot be supported or documented here, although it has been substantiated to my satisfaction with respect to my proposed doctoral dissertation.

13. See p. 115 and n. 19 for a further discussion of the subject. It should be noted, in addition, that the categories to which the contingent properties of an individual, *qua* member of the natural class N, belong are determined by the stereotype associated with N: they are these categories to which the stereotypical properties belong.

14. We could, alternatively, have used the term 'ice' for the natural class consisting of just those things that have the properties responsible for the stereotypical properties of ice, reserving the term 'water' for the liquid members of this class.

15. It could, for instance, be discovered that the property responsible for typical anger-behaviour belonged to an utterly different category consider the humours theory, the prevailing common-sense "feeling" theory and its rival neurophysical theory — or it could be discovered that, within the given category, the property responsible for typical anger-behaviour was other than it had been believed to be.

16. "How like a fawning publican he looks" (*Merchant of Venice*, I, iii, 42) says Shylock of Antonio, as the latter approaches to solicit his loan.

17. Keats, J., *The Eve of St. Agnes*, l. 153.

18. I should mention that this interpretation of the metaphor is only one, and the shallowest one, of the various possible interpretations. See p. 116 for the multivocality of metaphor.

19. As far as literal terms — and especially terms that have been in language since its birth and beginnings — are concerned, the rudiments of the relevant theories have most probably been phylogenetically built up.

20. Jonson, B., *A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyrick Peeces:* 9. Her Man Described by Her Owne Dictamen, l. 18. In connection with this example I should point out that the metaphorical introduction of terms for sensory qualities, as above, may seem to belie my account of metaphor as well as my position on general terms. Where is the stereotype, where the essence, where the theory? Elucidating the relevant points, however, would take us too far afield into the philosophy of perception. I can, therefore, only affirm without substantiating it, that contrary to appearances metaphor in respect of sensory qualities more than any-

thing else supports the suggested account. Terms for sensory qualities are introduced by picking out some sort of individual that commonly connotes that quality, or rather, the stereotypical properties associated with it: snow-white, flame-red, star-bright, metallic-lustre, egg-shaped, room-temperature, rose-scent, velvet-touch, metallic-sound, etc.

21. That is not to say that some of the terms thus introduced may not, in fact, happen to exist in language.

22. Multivocality is not confined to metaphorical language. Connotation is always operative unless intentionally suppressed. On the view supported here, connotation acquires both semantic and cognitive import: literal terms, when allowed, have metaphorical overtones via their connotations, thus rendering the sentences semantically multivocal and cognitively plural.

23. I am indebted to Paul Calligas and Peter Meloney for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.