# THE PROBLEM OF METAPHOR IN THEORY OF MEANING

## W. A. MYERS

Metaphor has often been considered the domain of the literary critic, and it is only comparatively recently that philosophers have become aware of metaphor as a problem for philosophy of language. In this paper I want to show how the occurrence of metaphor poses a problem for formulating an adequate account of meaning.

First, I wish to discuss what metaphor is. One very common view is that a metaphor involves an implicit comparison of things—that it is in fact a covert case of simile. Monroe Beardsley rejects this view, which he calls the "object-comparison" theory, as inadequate to explain all cases of metaphor. He puts forward instead his "verbal-oppositon" theory according to phor. He puts forward instead his "verbal-oppositon" theory according to which our recognition of a metaphor depends upon a tension in the usage of words. As Beardsley puts it,

> The possibility of the metaphorical performance—the opportunities that a living language presents for fooling around with meanings in this particular way—depend upon a felt difference between two sets of properties in the intension, or signification, of a general term.[1]

He describes metaphor as involving a shift in meaning from the properties which are taken as "necessary conditions for applying the word correctly in a particular sense" to "properties that belong to the marginal meaning of the term."[2] Now here Beardsley is describing an early version of his theory. He goes on,

> ... when a term is combined with others in such a way that there would be a logical opposition between its central meaning and that of the other terms, there occurs that shift from central to marginal meaning which shows us the word is to be taken in a metaphorical way. It is the only way it can be taken without absurdity.[3]

Marcus Hester makes a similar point when he says

> A way of recognizing implicit metaphors [i.e. ones which do not include "signal" words such as 'like' or 'as'] is that they startle our literal language sense. Implicit metaphors are odd ways of thinking.[4]

In the revised version of Beardsley's verbal-opposition theory he makes allowance for the fact that metaphor can occur when there is no already existing "marginal meaning" to shift to. In other words, a metaphor can create new meaning. He says, (in reference to an example), "Thus this metaphor does not merely thrust latent connotations into the foreground of meaning, but brings into play some properties that were not previously meant by it."[5]

Without considering the arguments for and objections to the verbal-opposition theory we can yet see that two features of metaphor, by this account, stand out: (1) the shift from standard meaning of a term used metaphorically, and (2) the possibility of creating new meanings altogether by metaphorical usage. This second feature has been emphasized also by Max Black, who attacks what he calls the "substitution view" of metaphor, that is, the view that a sentence containing a metaphorical usage can have a literal sentence substituted for it without change of meaning.[6] Black notes that often there is simply no literal equivalent to the metaphorical usage. He argues for what he calls the "interaction view," which claims that a metaphoric usage forces the hearer to connect two disparate ideas, which interact together. By connections thus made, metaphor *organizes* to an extent our understanding of the concepts connected. This point helps indicate the reason literal paraphrase of a metaphor is never quite adequate; as Black says:

> The literal paraphrase inevitably says too much—and with the wrong emphasis. One of the points I most wish to stress is that the loss in such cases is a loss in cognitive content; the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit (or deficient in qualities of style); it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight the metaphor did.[7]

This emphasis on the ability of metaphoric usages to give new meanings is found in other thinkers on the subject as well, notably Owen Barfield and Philip Wheelwright. Barfield argues that metaphorical usages are chiefly responsible for shifts in the standard meanings of words. His "Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction" develops this theory in detail,[8] and in his book *Poetic Diction*[9] he gives numerous examples.

Beardsley has a similar notion in his essay "The Metaphoric Twist" where he distinguishes three stages in the process of a word's acquiring a new meaning, the second of which is the initial metaphorical usage where "properties that are definitely not part of the intension of that word" become, "at least temporarily," part of its meaning.[10]

In *Metaphor and Reality* Wheelwright distinguishes two types of metaphor which he calls "epiphor" and "diaphor." Epiphor, he says, is a transference of meanings: "Epiphoric metaphor starts by assuming a usual meaning for a word; it then applies this word to something else on the basis of, and in order to indicate, a comparison of what is familiar."[11] This notion seems close to the comparison views criticised by both Black and Beardsley if such views are taken to include the whole of metaphoric usages, but Wheelwright says epiphor is only part of the story, and indeed Black too admits that some metaphors do compare concepts. Diaphor is characterized by Wheelwright as a movement (*phora*) through (*dia*)

"certain particulars of experience (actual or imagined) in a fresh way, producing new meaning by juxtaposition alone."[12] Further on he says, "The essential possibility of diaphor lies in the broad ontological fact that new qualities and new meanings can emerge, simply come into being, out of some hitherto ungrouped combination of elements."[13]

Wheelwright, like Black, also examines the so-called tensive feature of metaphor, the fact that metaphoric usages often set up a tension between sets of concepts or between accepted meanings and possible meanings in a context.

It seems to me that we are now able to note three characteristics of metaphor: (1) metaphor is linguistic usage which is striking because of its oddity—it creates a tension between the accepted literal meanings of a term and the possible meanings in the context in which it is found; (2) no literal paraphrase can quite adequately translate the meaning of a metaphoric usage; (3) metaphor can create new meanings which in some instances can become standard meanings.

This characterization emphasizes some features of metaphor to the exclusion of others, but I hope it will be seen that if this characterization is correct, then an adequate theory of meaning, to account for metaphor, must be able to explain the novelty of some metaphoric usages—the usages in which a new meaning is apparent.

Let us look at some ways of explaining meaning. For the sake of brevity I have found it useful to refer to the classification of types of theory of meaning given by William Alston in *Philosophy of Language*, even though it ignores important distinctions between some theories. Alston groups theories of meaning as either referential, ideational, or behavioral. He defines the distinction as follows:

> The referential theory identifies the meaning of an expression with that to which it refers or with the referential connection, the ideational theory with the ideas with which it is associated, and the behavioral theory with the stimuli that evoke its utterance and/or the responses that it in turn evokes.[14]

Thus, as examples of referential theories we might cite the Platonic theory of Forms as it relates to language, the Stoic doctrine of the *lekton*, and Frege's essay "On Sense and Nominatum." Perhaps the most famous example of an ideational theory is one given by Alston: John Locke's conceptualism. Behavioral theories are found among modern psychologically oriented writers such as Charles Morris[15] and Charles Osgood,[16] and would include, in Alston's classification, the recent attempts, following Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, to define meaning in terms of use.

What I want to suggest is that behavioral theories in general are in difficulty over explaining creative metaphor. All theories have difficulty

with the origins of language—the genesis of this particular mode of symbolic expression—but I believe that some theories are better able than others to account for shifts of meaning in the known history of words. A theory that identifies meaning with the publicly observable aspects of utterance and response—e.g., with the behavior that results from the utterance—relies on some form of definition to answer the crucial question, How does a word come to mean what it is understood to mean? Stipulative definition is an obvious way to change the signification of a word, i.e., by asserting a synonymy or coextensionality between two linguistic expressions. Ostensive definition can also create or shift signification, but metaphoric shifts of usage are not like stipulative or ostensive definition—or like *defining* at all. In a metaphoric shift, a term is simply employed in a new way, and employed without any prior agreement or convention regarding this *usage*. We can document shifts of meaning in English words historically, and it is apparent on considering examples given by Barfield and others that what signals the shift of meaning is the oddity of usage if taken literally. And as Beardsley, Black, Barfield, and Wheelwright have all pointed out, the oddity of utterance results from the absence of a rule for the use of the word with precisely that signification.

To put the point differently, if a theory which identifies meaning with use alone, or with the publicly observable aspects of utterance and response, is correct, then a creative metaphor, in its first use, would be nonsense; there being no prior convention or stipulation for the usage of the word in just that way, the sentence containing the metaphor would be gibberish. But metaphorical usages are understood, and do create new signification for words. Comprehension of that shift in signification does not depend upon one's understanding of a relation of synonymy between terms as it seems to in a case of stipulative definition. There is a problem here for behavioral theories.

If we consider that an expression has a range of possible potential references only some of which are actual at a given time, then a creative use of metaphor is an act of connecting one of those potential references to the expression. In such a case the success of the connection—the ability of the metaphor to convey new meaning—depends upon the prior existence of the possibility of connection. This notion of possibility needs further explication, which I cannot supply here.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that metaphoric shifts of meaning need to be explained in an adequate theory of meaning. As a final point let me suggest (with some misgiving), that a referential theory of the sort developed by Plato, the Stoics, and Frege may be better equipped to handle metaphor than a behavioral theory by virtue of its ability to consider as really existent the possibilities of novel connection that words must have if we are to account for metaphoric shifts.

I have dealt only with word-meaning in this paper, and I have not made room in this already much-compressed exposition for examples which might have made the foregoing more palatable; but if what I have said can be taken as a suggestion of a problem, perhaps the result can be some more adequate theory of meaning than now exists.

## NOTES

[1] Monroe Beardsley, "The Metaphorical Twist," in Warren Shibles, *Essays on Metaphor* (Whitewater, Wis.: 1972) p. 79.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 79-80.

[4] Marcus Hester, *The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor* (The Hague and Paris: 1967) p. 26.

[5] Beardsley, p. 84.

[6] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithica, N.Y.: 1962) pp. 30ff.

[7] Ibid., p. 46.

[8] Reprinted in Max Black, *The Importance of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1962) pp. 51-71.

[9] (London: 1928), Third edition published by Wesleyan University Press (Middletown, Conn.: 1973).

[10] Beardsley, p. 84.

[11] Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, Ind., and London: 1962) p. 72.

[12] Ibid., p. 78.

[13] Ibid., p. 85.

[14] William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1964) pp. 11-12.

[15] *Signs, Language, and Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1946).

[16] *Method and Theory in Experimental Psychology* (New York: 1953), especially Ch. 16.

*University of New Mexico*