THE SIGNIFICANCE OF METAPHOR

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An affective or ideational theory of meaning is best suited for explicating metaphor, simile, and symbol. But in order that an ideational theory may be accepted in these nominalistic times, one must provide some evidence for, or at least a plausible explanation of, how it is that meaning is something more than a system property, i.e., a property of the language being used. The writings of Lorenz and other ethologists can serve as a foundation upon which to construct an affective theory. Lorenz's work and his ways of talking about his work imply, at some level, the existence of biological universals. Thus we can accept all that modern nominalism has to say about "conventions" in language and yet maintain that these linguistic conventions owe their being to a more fundamental species specific biological "convention". The following paper divides into three parts. First, the nominalistic, conventionalistic position is sketched. Second, the central ethological ideas are introduced, and third, through a look at some specific aspects of a well-known essay, Thoreau's "Life Without Principle", the writers hope to show that something more than a bare nominalistic account is needed.

Goodman tells us that to understand metaphor one must recognize that a label usually functions within a schema of labels. To say of an object that it is "red" suggests that it might have been labeled "blue", "green", etc. Thus the metaphorical application of a term usually means that the classification schema of which the term is a member is implicitly applied to a new realm.

> A label along with others constituting a schema is in effect detached from the home realmof that schema and applied for the sorting and organizing of an alien realm. Partly by thus carrying with it a reorientationof a whole network of labels does a metaphor give clues for its own development and elaboration.[1]

On this view, metaphor does not differ in any essential way from simile—both are ways whereby an organizational schema is exported to a new realm. And a symbol becomes merely a special kind of frozen metaphor.

Goodman's views are quite compatible with the way of thinking exemplified in David Lewis's "conventions". A classification schema would, of course, be conventionally established and conventionally exported. Exported here refers to the transference of a classificational schema from its home realm to another. An attempt at metaphorical expression will fail if the schema is not conventionally established or if one "violates" the conventions of exportation.

The nominalism and relativism which characterizes the writings of

Goodman, Lewis, and, to a large extent, Quine wherein truth reduces to intrasubjective agreement practically entails the above described function of all figurative language. When language is characterized as a complex of present dispositions to verbal behaviors and one then asks, "How do we acquire our complex of present dispositions to verbal behaviors?" Quine answers for the nominalists by postulating the notion of a skewed classification space. This classification space spontaneously rearranges to provide maximum determination. There is a spontaneous tendency toward reduction of entropy—a tendency to substitute a different classification matrix into the classification space if a more determinant representation is thereby produced. The classification space is, as a whole, metastable.

Adopting the modern nominalist's view of language learning and use implies that one must construe communication as a matching up of classification spaces in the sender and the receiver of a message. Therefore, figurative language use becomes intrasubjective agreement about the uses of the figure. According to Goodman, "anything can represent anything else". And our failure to accept certain representations is to be accounted for as the basis of habit alone.

Language use thus becomes nothing but an aspect of "rule-governed behavior", in the sense that Peter Winch uses that notion in The Idea of a Social Science. The rules are completely free floating and arbitrary; there is nothing deeper. But all of our experience of life tells us that there is something deeper. And a promising account of what is deeper can be formulated from an examination of a relatively new science—ethology.

Reflections on animal behavior can illuminate human social behavior, whether or not that behavior is characterized as "rule governed". Some ways of "reflecting" may, however, be more "illuminating" than others. During the twentieth century, the composite and cumulative activities of several persons have generated a base of data, an array of procedures, and a system of constructs which, taken together, are called ethology. As a provisional indicator of what ethology is about, we will call it the study of animal behavior in natural surroundings.

Ethology began with the work of Charles Otis Whitman, who first compiled ethograms on pigeons. These ethograms, together with morphological considerations already catalogued, enabled Whitman to produce a significantly superior taxonomy of the family. Whitman had already affirmed his faith in the constancy of inherited behavior patterns when he said, "Instincts and organs are to be studied from the common viewpoint of phyletic descent".[2] The behavior patterns that Whitman used in his taxonomy later came to be called innate reaction schema or innate reaction mechanisms (IRM's). IRM's are triggered by a relatively small set of stimulus conditions called releasers.

Discussion of releasers which originate with a conspecific, and particularly the "social releasers", will get us closer to indicating the relevance of ethology to "rule-governed behavior". Konrad Lorenz states the position forcefully: "The entire sociology of higher animals is built upon the basis of releasers and innate schemata, and the thin putty of acquired behavior patterns is relatively so unimportant

that as a basic principle any sociological investigation should start by analyzing the two innate elements mentioned above".[3]

Social releasers and their corresponding IRM's may well constitute the necessary basis for social interaction and enable us to formulate an account of the most direct and immediate element of so-called intuitive knowledge, but they are not the whole story. Nor are they by any means the whole of the innate portion of the story. Another kind of information is obtained by the mechanism of gestalt perception—a form of perception which can be apprehended more effectively from an ethological frame of reference than from previously existing frameworks. The difference between the mechanisms of sign stimuli and gestalt perception is stated by Lorenz in the following passage:

> On observing a specific facial expression of a fellow human being, we can "intuitively" and directly share his experience. At night, on looking out of the window of a train, we can correctly interpret the relative displacement of a few light-points as parallactic; in consequence, we can not only form a direct image of the distribution of the lights, but also deduce the movement of the train itself. These two achievements are doubtless based on quite different physiological processes. The first...is based on an innate releasing mechanism; the second on one of those extremely complex computing processes which are so characteristic of our spatial Gestalt perception and so similar to conscious calculation that Helmholtz was able to regard them as subconscious conclusions. However, both processes are functions of neural organic structures, which have arisen in the course of evolution of our species in interaction with, and in adaptation to, properties of our environment.[4]

The ethological approach to understanding human behavior is that the interplay of releasers and IRM constitute the basic linkage between human beings. The means by which we can come to know what these linkages are is Gestalt perception. Thus a pattern of words elicits a pattern of images, and these images in turn have features which trigger IRM's. Of course, we must share a common language if this process is to take place, but according to Lorenz, our image apparatus is not independent of the world.

> The organization of our perceptions, of our forms and categories of our conceptualization (in short, of our entire "world-image apparatus"), in fact incorporates quite a lot of information about the real properties about which it notifies us in the form of phenomena. It is not the a priori schematism of our conceptual processes and through which arbitrarily and independently prescribes for extra-subjective reality the form it assumes in our phenomenal world. In terms of phylo-

geny, it was the other way around: extra-subjective reality, in the course of aeons of persistent struggle for survival, has forced our developing "world-image apparatus" to give due reckoning to its properties.[5]

Thus while our schema of representation (language) may be in many ways arbitrary, what is represented is not arbitrary. The ethological point of view leads us to postulate the existence of biological universals which are the same for all persons to the degree that they share a common phylogeny. Therefore we say that metaphorical expression "works" because a familiar representational schema already keyed to the concrete images arising from our universal perceptual constancy mechanisms (Gestalt perception) is exported and used to organize some new experiential realm. And in saying this, we are committing ourselves to the primacy of perception. The author of a literary work wants, in the words of Joseph Conrad, "above all else to make us see"—and when we "see" then the author has communicated his ideas.

In communicating ideas to others, a writer can work only with words. Meaning is developed through the choice of words and the way the words are fitted together into patterns making up the whole. The structure of sentences; the placement of words and of phrases; the rhythm, sound, and stress provided by words all contribute to develop meaning. But meaning is further determined through the use of figurative language, the use of words which evoke concrete, specific images which, through a turn or extension of the literal meaning, are used to represent a special and more abstract meaning or effect. By using a number of images in a consistent manner whereby a pattern or schema is developed, the author's meaning can be fixed.

Metaphors both depend upon and create a common frame of reference for the reader and the writer. The specific images which serve as the basis for the metaphors are chosen from a universe of possible images. But the author, in choosing certain images rather than others, does so because he desires or intends a certain effect. In analyzing how meaning is created, one must examine the metaphors and the images upon which those metaphors are based. To facilitate univocal communication, the author attempts to select words evocative of clear images—if it is his intention to communicate a specific idea. By selecting less concrete images, an author could be more suggestive, using language as a point of departure from which the reader can go in several directions according to what thoughts are elicited in his mind by the images used. How metaphor works can be examined more specifically.

In "Life Without Principle", Henry David Thoreau makes a distinction between two ways in which people can go about the business of living their lives. His point seems to be that we can choose whether our time will be frittered away in meaningless superficial trivialities or if we will spend our time in activities which are meaningful to the individual. Most workaday business Thoreau sees as external to the mind. If instead one chooses activities which keep in touch with the real self and in tune with nature, one can, Thoreau believed, discover universal truths for oneself. An image pattern is developed to contrast what we will call surface details with an inner truth.[6]

Page	Image	Surface Details	Inner Truth
81,93	body	extremities	heart, thought
81,92	nut	shell	meat, the "living kernal"
81-84	business, work	money, getting a living	wealth, living
86-87	society or sounds	gossip of courtroom	conversation
87	house	shell or frame	"sills" or foundation
88,91	reading	letters, newspapers, i.e., the Times	the "Eternities"-- Thoreau calls the rising of the sun a "universal fact"

In Thoreau's essay, the images upon which the comparisons for the metaphors are based refers to things or activities which are part of our common everyday experience. The author then develops two aspects of each image to contrast two ways of experiencing the world. In this way, an image pattern is created in the metaphors.

Certain metaphors are used so frequently in Thoreau's writings that the meaning becomes fixed and acquires symbolic content. The newspaper is for Thoreau a symbol of that superficial, transcient world he wished to see beyond. Sufficient writers, Kierkegaard and Camus, for example, have used the newspaper metaphorically in this sense so that a public symbol has been created.

Another example of a public symbol is the snake, which is traditionally used either for the connotations of evil or sin or for the sexual connotations the word has been associated with. In reading literature if we encounter a reference to a snake or serpent, our reaction is colored by the traditional symbolic use of the word. If a writer chooses to use the word to evoke another response he must do so carefully; yet probably it is when a writer does build upon the public meaning that the symbol is used most effectively. In Jesse Stuart's brief story, "Love", a snake is the central image. Upon encountering the snake, the father says, "A snake is an enemy to me...I hate a snake". But as the story develops we are shown the son's attitude toward the snake and become willing to accept the idea of the snake as representing life, even love. The tension between the two ideas represented by the snake create the story's meaning.

But if there is no reference to the public symbolic meanings associated with a word, such as snake, if the public meaning is not used as a point of departure, then communication may fail. Likewise, if one selects images which are unique to one's private experience, as some

early twentieth century American poets did, communication will fail. The arbitrary use of images as the basis of metaphor may be possible, butit is questionable if an author's intended meaning will be developed.

Thus we are led back to an affective theory of meaning. Both the sender and receiver of a verbal message must operate from a common classification space wherein common locutions address common elements of a classification schema which owes its existence to a common phylogeny. The sender, when he indulges in metaphor has already organized some other realm by means of the commonly held classification schema and is intending that the receiver will "see" the utility of this exportation.

NOTES

1. Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art, An Approach to a Theory of Symbols (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1968), p. 72.

2. Charles Otis Whitman, The Behavior of Pigeons, Carnegie Institute of Washington Publications, 257 (1919).

3. Konrad Lorenz, "The Comparative Study of Behavior", 1939. In Lorenz and Leyhausen, Motivation of Human and Animal Behavior, An Ethological View, trans. by B.A. Tonkin (New York: Van Nostrand and Reinhold Company, 1973), p. 24.

4. Konrad Lorenz, "Gestalt Perception as a Source of Scientific Knowledge", p. 59. In Lorez, Studies in Animal and Human Behavior, Vol. II, trans. by Robert Martin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 291.

5. Ibid., pp. 288-91.

6. Henry David Thoreau, "Life Without Principle". In Great English and American Essays, ed. Douglass S. Mead (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 80-93.