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Metaphor and the Analytic-Philosophy Cuisine

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The philosophy of language is often understood, or rather a priori assumed, to be the province par excellence of analytic philosophy. William Lycan's "contemporary introduction" to the "philosophy of language," which saw its third edition in 2019¹ (the first two were published in 2000 and 2008), is a perfect example of this somewhat unwarranted assumption.

In this new edition Parts I ("Reference and Referring"), II ("Theories of Meaning"), and III ("Pragmatics and Speech Acts") have been only slightly updated. Conversely, Part IV ("The Expressive and the Figurative," formerly "The Dark Side"), has been expanded (instead of one single chapter on "Metaphor" it includes two: one on "Expressive Language," and the other one on "Metaphor") and given a new (descriptive instead of metaphoric) title.

It is, therefore, on Part IV (p. 181-214) that I should like to briefly focus on here. First, because it contains the biggest change introduced in this third edition. Secondly, because it proves fascinating due to what it says and to what it omits, in which it moreover offers a case in point for the analysis of language, thereby allowing the reader to put the book itself to the test by submitting it to the test of its object.²

While acknowledging that language can be exclusively "expressive" (p. 183, thus the examination of interjections, irony, sarcasm, and pejorative language on p. 184-195) as well as "metaphorical" (p. 196), Lycan underlines that, as a general rule, philosophers "like language to be literal," and "tend to think that literal speech is the default and metaphorical utterances are occasional aberrations, made mainly by poets and poets manqué" (p. 197). In fact they do not – safe analytic philosophers, that is: Parmenides and Plato in ancient times (not to mention Heraclitus and Democritus), Rousseau and

¹ W. G. Lycan. *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction* (3rd ed.; London & New York: Routledge, 2019).

² To borrow freely from Althusser's take on the interplay between a text and its object in "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy" (collected in L. Althusser, E. Balibar, R. Establet, P. Macherey & J. Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, London & New York: Verso, 24-131).

Heidegger in modern times (not to mention Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) prove otherwise, to list but a few names. As for the suggestion that poetry is a linguistic “aberration,” one could easily evoke Herder, Goethe, von Humboldt, Hölderlin, and Schlegel, against it; yet it might be better to cite here Simon Blackburn’s insight (which he himself dismisses as a “misleading stereotype,” perhaps wrongly?) that “the analytical philosopher is centrally in the business of paraphrase,” while poetry is “resistant” to it.³

Philosophers tend to think that “literal speech is the default” when they want to figure out the conventional things that can be (a) uttered in simple denotative terms (b) within the repertoire of a closed linguistic system, without asking themselves, then, about non-immediate denotation, connotation, and the emergent qualities of language. Nevertheless, limiting the study of language to *a* and *b* impoverishes it from both a linguistic and philosophical standpoint. Now, despite its merits, analytic philosophy has made of that impoverishment, as it were, an unjustified axiom. One could well apply to this what, drawing on what Lévi-Strauss famously said about the English cuisine (to wit, that its “main dishes” are “made from endogenous ingredients, prepared in a relatively bland fashion, and surrounded with more exotic accompaniments”),⁴ Roy Wagner said about English social thought, namely, that “[s]ince the days of Adam Smith and before” it has “often approached its subject matter in terms of, or with relation to a few bland, endogenous ‘main dishes,’ such as utilitarianism, the idea of wealth as ‘property,’ enlightened self-interest, the sanctity of law and institutions, and the notion of ‘common sense’”⁵ – add: and of language’s “literal meaning.”

Lycan himself takes such tendency to be a “bias,” and stresses that “sentences are very often used in perfectly *ordinary* contexts with other than their literal meanings” (p. 197, emphasis added). But does this not reinforce, if tacitly, the supposition that the “ordinary” (Goethe would have said flavourless) use of language supplies to language its norm? Besides, who can say what the ordinary *is* in each case, i.e. within the different “language games” (Wittgenstein) of different speakers, e.g. an analytic

³ S. Blackburn, “Can An Analytic Philosopher Read Poetry?” (in *The Philosophy of Poetry* [ed. John Gibson; Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015], 111-126), 115.

⁴ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 68.

⁵ R. Wagner, “Review of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*” (*The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 79.2 [1970]: 245-252), 245.

philosopher, Kant's shopkeeper, a surrealist poet, or the Bororo natives met by Lévi-Strauss?

In one thing Lycan is right, however: virtually every sentence contains "metaphorical elements" (p. 197) of one kind or another; consider e.g., he notes, "the number of times in a day that someone utters the word 'level,'" which "is almost invariably [a] metaphor, unless the speaker is actually talking about a horizontal layering of some physical thing." This shows how often "novel metaphors" turn into "idioms" or "clichés," i.e. into "dead metaphors," as Lakoff and Johnson have it (p. 197).

Accordingly, Lycan's treatment of Ross and Kittay (p. 210-212) proves far more interesting than his treatment of Davidson (p. 198-200), Fogelin (p. 201-204), Searle (p. 204-208), and Walton (p. 208-209). For unlike Fogelin, who views metaphor as a mere figurative comparison based on a thing's salient features, and thus turns metaphor – it can be argued – into metonymy; unlike Davidson, who thinks a metaphor's meaning to be literal whatever the intent of the speaker, thus dissolving – one is tempted to venture – any metaphor into a trick; unlike Walton, who claims that metaphors are best understood by reference to games of make-believe, which once more amounts to turn metaphors into tricks; and unlike Searle, who breaks down the interpretation of a metaphor's meaning into so many troublesome steps (1. deciding whether the word in question must be interpreted literally or not, 2. determining the strategies for generating a range of possible meanings for it, and 3. selecting from these the most appropriate meaning) that the apprehension of any metaphor would be – one fears – as infinitely differed in time as Zeno's attempt to catch his turtle; unlike them Ross and Kittay contend, first, that "any word, even a pronoun, *may* take on any number of *novel* and distinct [...] meanings without limit, given a suitable variety of *environments* within sentences in which they occur," so that "one and the same word, depending on the [...] context and [...] circumstances, can mean almost *anything*" (p. 210-211, emphasis added); and, secondly, that "novel word meanings are generated in context *from* existing ones by intricate but fairly tractable mechanisms of *analogy* that are mobilized automatically by every normal speaker" (p. 211, emphasis added). In short, they show that *we use words metaphorically* and that we do so *even when we do not think we do*.⁶

Clearly, Lycan could – or maybe should – have included in his survey Roy Wagner's – one of the most remarkable cultural anthropologists of our times, who

⁶ A view that, somewhat despondently, Lycan qualifies as being "too complicated" (p. 212).

passed away in 2018 but whose latest, posthumous book⁷ appeared, like Lycan's, in 2019 – ongoing (since 1972)⁸ study of the role of metaphor, and trope in general, in the production of “meaning” and the “modeling of culture,” which is but “*analogy* based on (and subversive to) other *analogies*.”⁹

Thus, for example, when a Bororo metaphorises his identity as that of a “parakeet,” he forms an *analogy* that stresses his distinctiveness from other men (those who, belonging in a different tribe, call themselves “toucans”) and his similarity to other men (those who are “parakeets” like him because they belong in his own tribe) to satisfy notions of totemism and tribal classification; when he metaphorises his identity as that of a “man,” he forms an *analogy* that stresses his distinctiveness from other people (the elder, women, and children of his family) and his similarity to other men (those who, beyond his family but within his tribe, call themselves “men” in contrast to their own elder, women, and children) to satisfy notions of progeny, kinship role, and social status; and when he metaphorises his identity as that of a “jaguar,” he forms an *analogy* that stresses his distinctiveness from other men (those who, among the people of his tribe but in contrast to him, are not shamans) and his similarity to other men (those who, despite belonging in a different tribe, may be shamans like him) to satisfy notions of shamanic theriomorphism and perspectival shift.

Hence just like analogy, and thus metaphor, can be said to be the mirror of meaning, *meaning can be said to be the mirror of analogy and metaphor*.¹⁰ Put otherwise, “meaning is a perception within [...] the ‘value space’ set up by symbolic points of reference” connected by a recurring analogical “flow.”¹¹

Again: Lycan could – or perhaps should – have taken into account Wagner's life-long study on trope and the production of meaning, but that would have meant for him to make room for the exotic not just as an accompaniment in the analytic-philosophy milieu.

⁷ R. Wagner, *The Logic of Invention* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2019).

⁸ I.e. beginning with *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

⁹ R. Wagner, *Symbols That Stand for Themselves* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5, 7 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.