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Metaphor

Annemie Halsema

Metaphor is not only one of the most commonly used figures of speech in everyday language, it also has attracted more philosophical interest than any other figure of speech. Metaphor is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a form of figurative language; it is "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them." Besides, it also denotes the object or activity or idea of metaphor itself. Philosophically interesting about the notion is the possibility of using one word or phrase instead of another, which introduces analogy, similarity, displacement but also imagination and **creativity** into language and, for some philosophers, into everyday life.

Metaphors are of interest to philosophers in the Anglo-American analytic tradition, because they escape the accepted conditions for determining the truth value of statements, yet cannot simply be set aside as not meaningful. Consequentially, analytic philosophers such as Max Black (1962, 1979) and Donald Davidson (1984) aim to define the function of metaphor as heuristic and as inspirational and guiding our insight, and not as related to truth. Especially Black (1979) develops a theory of metaphor in which the interaction between the two subject terms explains its meaning, thereby at once alluding to the conventions within

80 a linguistic community as leaving some space for creating new meaning.

Continental philosophers do not so much tackle metaphor in a linguistic context but rather consider it in a broader sense. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche ([1873] 1999) and Jacques Derrida (1982) point critically at the metaphorical character of all concept formation and of metaphysics in particular, while others, such as Paul Ricoeur, understand metaphor more positively in terms of our abilities to see things anew making use of imagination. In *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), Ricoeur draws together insights from Kantian philosophy, notably the notion of productive imagination, and linguistic philosophy (i.e., the ideas of structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Émile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, but also of the father of analytical philosophy, Gottlob Frege), in order to describe metaphor as the stimulus of change in both the linguistic and ontological or existential field. Metaphor for Ricoeur makes us see things differently, because of its **transformative** aspect, which at once disturbs the logical order while begetting it in a new form. Living, as opposed to dead, metaphors cannot be simply **translated** into existing terms; understanding them requires a novel way of perceiving reality. As such they create new reality. Metaphors, in other words, pertain to sameness *and* difference, they refer to reality while at the same time redescribing it.

Derrida in "White Mythology" (1982) uses this ambiguous character of the metaphor to critique philosophy, while at the same time affirming it. He relates metaphor to philosophy itself, claiming that philosophy is nothing more than a **process** of metaphorisation. Philosophy, he writes in a Nietzschean fashion, aims at a ruling metaphor, at similarity, and in its deepest dreams at reducing all significations to a principal, fundamental, or central metaphor. But metaphoricity in itself implies multiplicity, and philosophy expresses itself in texts, which implies that meaning can never be exhausted. He detects two trajectories in philosophy, that he both calls self-destructive and that are closely

related: One is the metaphysical sublation of the metaphor into the proper sense of being in which metaphor implies a detour and loss of meaning, but one in which the literal, proper sense can be appropriated in the end (Derrida 1982, 270). In the other, the opposition between metaphoricity and the proper itself is set aside, an opposition foundational for metaphysics. Thereby metaphysics in the end sublates itself.

Since metaphor in the analytical and continental tradition of philosophy is already described in detail in other sources (e.g., Hills 2012; Theodorou), here we can further concentrate on the notion of metaphor as influential in critical forms of theory, notably in psychoanalysis and feminist theory. Jacques Lacan famously introduced the notion of metaphor, in distinction to metonymy, to reinterpret the central workings of the Freudian unconscious. Both notions play an important role in the French psychoanalytically inspired feminist theories, such as Julia Kristeva's and Luce Irigaray's. The latter is especially critical of Lacan's use of metaphor and develops notions such as the "two lips" and "the mucous" with the aim of rewriting and recreating the symbolic. These notions are either interpreted as metonymic (Whitford 1991, 180) or as subverting the binary metonymy/metaphor (Fuss 1990; Joy 2013).

Lacan introduced the notion of metaphor in his rereading of the processes of repression and displacement, both of which are for Freud the basic functions of the unconscious. As is well known for Lacan Freud's discovery anticipates modern linguistics (Lacan 2006, 578). He uncovers a relation between the laws governing the unconscious and the laws of the signifier: repression is related to metaphor, and displacement to metonymy. He thereby draws upon Jakobson's distinction between selection and combination, which in itself is a reinterpretation of a similar distinction made by de Saussure, and was related to Freud already by Jakobson himself. Lacan reorders the terms: metonymy corresponds to Jakobson's "combination," that is, it relates two terms *in presentia*. Metaphor, in contrast, relates two or more terms

82 *in absentia*. Lacan defines the two terms as follows: Metonymy indicates “that it is the signifier-to-signifier connection that allows for the elision by which the signifier instates lack of being in the object-relation, using signification’s referral value to invest it with the desire aiming at the lack that it supports” (Lacan 2006, 428). Metonymy, therefore, refers to the replacement of one term for another: it defers meaning, but in itself cannot explain the process of a sign gaining meaning. Lacan follows de Saussure in understanding language as not referring to reality but rather as a system in which there are no positive terms, only differences between signs. Metonymy thus characterizes the process of signification in language.

Yet, on the basis of metonymy alone language would not have any meaning: every sign would be replaced by another, in a continuous process. Metaphor for Lacan is then – surprisingly, and according to some inconsistently – the mechanism that explains the creation of a specific meaning. Metaphor indicates “that it is in the substitution of signifier for signifier that a signification effect is produced that is poetic or creative, in other words, that brings the signification in question into existence” (429). Metaphor refers to the process of substitution between signifiers that in themselves do not have a fixed, “natural” meaning. It forms, in other words, a momentary stop in the incessant gliding of signifiers, but a stop that is always unexpected and not predestined in the signifier.

Although critical of Lacan, the notions of metaphor and metonymy in French feminist philosophy come to play a part in the context of rewriting the (phallic) symbolic in order to create more possibilities for women to articulate their subjectivity. Irigaray’s strategy of mimesis, for instance, in her early works, that aim at subversion of the phallogocentric discourse, can be seen as a metonymic strategy. Figurations named above, such as the two lips and the mucous, are part of this mimetic strategy. Irigaray herself writes that mimesis includes copying “anything at all, anyone at all, ... receiv[ing] all impressions, without

appropriating them to oneself, and without adding any" (Irigaray 1985, 151). Margaret Whitford accordingly interprets Irigaray's philosophy as rejecting metaphor, because it fixes and puts the signifying process to a halt, while metonymy "allows for process" (Whitford 1991, 180). Irigaray, in Whitford's interpretation, would suggest a maternal genealogy based upon metonymic identification, instead of the paternal (Lacanian) genealogy based upon paternal metaphorization. Morny Joy, in contrast, names Irigaray's strategy one of displacement of the metonymy/metaphor scheme. Irigaray, instead of alluding to metonymy, would aim at metamorphosis. Her new verbalizations of the female body "realign the terms of reference regarding sameness and otherness" (Joy 2013, 78). Yet, as Judith Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter*, one can also ask whether Irigaray's strategy does not lead to a renewed consolidation of the place of the feminine, albeit as "the irruptive *chora*, that which cannot be figured, but which is necessary for any figuration" (Butler 1993, 48). Does the feminine in this interpretation not figure as the nonidentical, and is it not miming the excluding violence of the phallogocentric discourse, repeating it once again? Read as such, Irigaray's strategy would remain close to Lacan's metaphorization. On the other hand, however, naming the nonidentical metaphorically, identifying it as that which cannot be figured ("a volume without contours," as Irigaray writes in *Speculum*), seems to blow up the entire process of metaphorization in itself. The critical engagements with metaphor in feminist theory as such continue its operations.

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