

Searle on Metaphor

Jakub Mácha

Masaryk University, Brno

Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to survey and evaluate Searle's account of metaphor (1979) in the light of Davidson's arguments against the idea of metaphorical meaning, which appeared at roughly the same time. Since this paper is intended for a festschrift celebrating Searle's respectable anniversary, I will mostly refrain from critical remarks and rather focus on the positive aspects of his account. I am going to show that Searle's theory of metaphor is for the most part immune to Davidson's arguments.

Keywords: metaphor; Searle; Davidson; literal meaning; metaphorical meaning.

Let me introduce the problem in question with an example of a rich metaphor by Wallace Stevens. He wrote the following verse-lines in his poem (2006, 60) "Sunday Morning":

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires.

To say that death is the mother of beauty is literally false. One may ask, then, what this metaphor means or in what sense it could be true. One may ask whether the poet intended to communicate some definite insight. One can fend off these questions by pointing out that such questions would deprive us of all poetic effects. The poet himself, however, infers other nontrivial insights about our dreams and desires from the metaphor. Hence, he might have meant something definite by the metaphor. These questions and considerations express intuitions behind the theories of metaphor that I am going to focus on.

1 Searle's account of metaphor

Searle builds his account of metaphor on his speech act theory based on a general Gricean framework. The main question he aims to investigate is "How do metaphorical utterances work, that is, how is it possible for speakers to communicate to hearers when speaking metaphorically inasmuch as they do not say what they mean?" (Searle 1979, 92). Since speakers mean and try to communicate something other than they say, metaphorical utterances are, thus, indirect speech acts. To be more formal, the speaker says that S is P and means metaphorically that S is R. Searle calls what the speaker says (that is "S is P") *a sentence meaning* and what she means (that is "S is R") *the speaker's utterance meaning*. The question is, thus, how it is possible to say "S is P" and both mean and communicate "S is R" where P does not literally mean R. Searle put this argument this way: If one can communicate "S is R" using "S is P" then the relation between the sentence meaning and the utterance meaning must be systematic. The next task is now to find shared principles or strategies of how to arrive from the sentence meaning to the utterance meaning.

First, there must be a principle that allows that the speaker's utterance will be taken metaphorically and that the hearer will recognize that the utterance is not meant literally, but metaphorically. The most common strategy is here to check out whether the utterance is obviously defective if taken literally, i.e. whether it is patently false or true.

Second, there must be principles generating all the possible values of the R term from the P term. Searle admits that there is no single principle that is distinctive about metaphorical utterances. He lists eight principles with the suspicion that there might be even more. Let me quote these principles and their examples from a compendious survey in Camp (2003, Ch. 1.2):

1. Things which are P are by definition R; usually R will be one of the salient defining characteristics of S. Example: "Sam is giant" means_{met} "Sam is big".
2. Things which are P are contingently R; again, R will usually be a salient or well-known property of P things. Example: "Sam is a pig" means_{met} "Sam is filthy, gluttonous, and sloppy, etc."
3. Things which are P are often said or believed to be R, even though both speaker and hearer may know that R does not in fact apply to

- P things. Example: "Richard is a gorilla" means_{met} "Richard is mean, nasty, prone to violence, and so on."
4. It is a fact about our sensibility, whether culturally or naturally determined, that we just do perceive a connection, so that P is associated in our minds with R. Example: "Sally is a block of ice" means_{met} "Sally is unemotional."
 5. The condition of being P is like the condition of being R. Example: "You have become an aristocrat" means_{met} "Your new status is like that of being an aristocrat".
 6. P and R are the same or similar in meaning, but one, usually P, is restricted in its application, and does not literally apply to S. Example: "His brain is addled" (no interpretation provided).
 7. A principle extending the simple 'S is P' form to other syntactical forms, basically by applying 1-6 at a higher order. Example: "The ship ploughs the sea" means_{met} "The ship moves the sea to the side of the prow as it moves forward".
 8. P and R may be related as part-whole or container-contained, so that metonymy and synecdoche also count as metaphors.¹

Notice that these principles are not context-dependent nor are their input data taken from the context. The only context-dependence here is based on the fact that the meanings of P and R as such are context-dependent, as will be explained later. The principles simply relate the predicate terms P and R as though they stood in isolation and thereby generate all possible values of the R term.

Third, the range of the possible values of R has to be restricted to the possible properties of the subject term S. Here the context enters again (the first step is context-dependent too) as it is a matter of the context that the predicate P, which is the basis for generating the possible values of R, stands in a predicative sentence together with the subject S.

Finally, I want to mention a feature that is distinctive of Searle's account and that has gone unnoticed even by authors sympathetic to him. Before introducing the principles presented above, Searle aims at a characterization of literal utterances. This is an extremely difficult task, for it amounts to characterizing predication in general. However, if we did not have an account of literal utterances and of literal meaning (at

¹ The notation 'means_{met}' abbreviates 'can be uttered metaphorically to mean that'.

least in a rough outline), then claims about metaphorical meaning (e.g. that it is secondary to the literal meaning or that there is no metaphorical meaning) would not say much. So, in a literal utterance, as already mentioned, the sentence meaning and the utterance meaning coincide. And, more important, “the literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth conditions relative to a set of background assumptions which are not part of the semantic content of the sentence” (Searle 1979, 96). It is also futile to say that metaphorical meaning is context-dependent or open-ended, because literal meaning could have these features as well.

2 Davidson’s arguments against the idea of metaphorical meaning

It is probably only a coincidence that Davidson’s paper “What Metaphors Mean” appeared in the same year as Searle’s paper “Metaphor”; so, I presume that there was no mutual influence. Davidson’s paper is mostly critical in focus, attacking the semantic theories of metaphor, especially the one given by Max Black (1955). Davidson’s main claim is that “metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more” (Davidson 2001, 245). Hence, Davidson denies that metaphors have any figurative, second or metaphorical meaning. “The central error about metaphor is most easily attacked when it takes the form of a theory of metaphorical meaning, but behind that theory, and storable independently, is the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message” (Davidson 2001, 262). We can read off two claims from this quotation. First, metaphors have no metaphorical meaning, and second, metaphors do not serve as means of communication. Both claims are in an apparent contradiction to Searle’s view, so we have to look carefully at Davidson’s intuitions and arguments for the support of his ideas.²

One thing has to be pointed out at the outset. Davidson uses the expression “meaning” without any qualification. One could wonder whether his arguments are valid for any conception of (literal) meaning

² I tried to give an exhaustive list and critical discussion of Davidson’s arguments in my book Mácha (2010). Other philosophers, e.g. Reimer (2001) or Lycan (forthcoming), offer other expositions of some of these arguments.

or whether they are restricted to his own minimal account of meaning and interpretation. I will first suppose that the former option is more plausible, since otherwise any reference of other philosophers' views would be impossible. Davidson's main thesis is, thus, that there is no metaphorical meaning beyond the literal one *in any conception of literal meaning*.

Intuition 1: There are no rules for the construction of metaphorical meaning or metaphorical content. "There are no instructions for devising metaphors; there is no manual for determining what a metaphor 'means' or 'says'; there is no test for metaphor that does not call for taste" (Davidson 2001, 245). Davidson offers no justification of this claim. It is rather an intuition of his, stated at the outset of his paper. Producing and understanding metaphors is a creative endeavor. If it were bound by rigorous rules, then the construction of metaphorical meaning would be a mechanical process and all creativity would be lost. I think something like this lies behind this intuition. Taken the other way around, if metaphor counted as a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon, there would have to be such rules. Davidson's intuition is, hence, that metaphor is neither a semantic, nor a pragmatic phenomenon.

Reply: Searle does not share this intuition with Davidson. His intuition or presupposition is that metaphors could be used as means of communication. It follows that there must be rules for construction of metaphorical meaning. Metaphor is hereby located among pragmatic phenomena and could be explained within the framework of Searle's speech act theory. The rules Searle gives are a plausible theoretical reconstruction of our understanding of metaphors. But the issue of creativity remains. Do these rules pose a problem for the claim that producing and understanding metaphors is creative? I think they do not. These rules are not formulated strictly. They allow a sort of creative freedom. Rule 4, for example, evokes a culturally or naturally determined association between literal and metaphorical meaning. To find out, however, which association exactly is the case, requires a lot of creativity. Similarly, rule 5 is based on the conditions of being P and R. But which condition exactly is the case is left to the speaker's and addressee's cooperative effort.

Argument 2: The idea of metaphorical meaning does not explain how metaphors work. "These ideas don't explain metaphor, metaphor explains them. Once we understand a metaphor we can call what we grasp the 'metaphorical truth' and (up to a point) say what the 'meta-

phorical meaning' is. But simply to lodge this meaning in the metaphor is like explaining why a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power" (Davidson 2001, 247). The idea of literal meaning has explanatory power, because literal meaning can be assigned to words (or linguistic items) apart from particular contexts of use. We cannot do the same with metaphorical meanings. Davidson's argument is, hence, that since we cannot assign metaphorical meanings apart from the contexts of use, the idea of metaphorical meaning has no explanatory power, and it is also pointless to postulate such a superfluous thing. If we could assign a metaphorical meaning to a metaphor regardless of the context of use, then the metaphor would become a dead one. The metaphorical meaning could then be a second meaning and could be enlisted in a lexicon.

Reply: This argument is directed against the semantic accounts of metaphorical meaning. Searle's metaphorical meaning is not a sentence meaning, but an utterance meaning which is assigned only in the context of use. Since there are principles stating how to generate a metaphorical meaning out of a (literal) sentence meaning and of shared background assumptions, metaphorical meaning is endowed with genuine explanatory power.

Argument 3: Dead metaphors involve literal meanings, but these are not fossilized metaphorical meanings. The first premise of this argument is that "If metaphor involved a second meaning, as ambiguity does, we might expect to be able to specify the special meaning of a word in a metaphorical setting by waiting until the metaphor dies" (Davidson 2001, 254). Davidson argues then that literal meanings are usually poor, simple or narrow compared with the way metaphors work. Thus, literal meanings of dead metaphors cannot be based on metaphorical meanings of living metaphors. Hence, there are no metaphorical meanings.

Reply: On Searle's account, literal meaning is not as narrow as Davidson's argument requires. The dying of a living metaphor may be explained as the settling down of one of its utterance meanings that happens to be so common that it could be assigned independently of any context of use and, thus, becomes a second sentence meaning. This argument, in fact, restricts the validity of Davidson's critical remarks on conceptions of meaning that are minimalistic like his own theory of meaning and interpretation or the semantic minimalism of his followers (see Lepore - Stone forthcoming).

Argument 4: If similes do not have a second meaning, then neither do metaphors. I do not want to question the premise. This argument presupposes, however, that metaphors and similes share the same logical form. Certainly, both figures involve similarities between their subjects. But why should they share the same logical form? It is not *prima facie* clear what the logical form of simile *A is like B* is. Is it an existential statement that there is a similarity between A and B or is it an assertion of a contextually salient similarity between the terms? In the former case, similes are trivial and there is no problem that the speaker literally means what she says by the simile. In the latter case, similes are figurative in the same way as metaphors are, and one has to provide an account of how to determine the similarity in question. In this case, similes and metaphors share the same logical form except that most similes are true and most metaphors are false. This could be the reason for postulating a second meaning to metaphors as opposed to similes. Following Lycan (forthcoming) I find this argument entirely unconvincing.

Reply: Searle (1979, 103) maintains that similes could be figurative and so they “need not necessarily commit the speaker to a literal statement of similarity”. The speaker of a simile could mean something different from what he says just like in a metaphor.

Argument 5: If metaphors had second meanings, these would be possible to express in literal paraphrases. But metaphors are, in general, not amenable to literal paraphrases. Hence, metaphors do not involve second meanings. Davidson offers a reason why this is so: “If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature, this would not in itself make trouble; we would simply project the content the metaphor brought to mind on to the metaphor. But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor ‘means’, we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention” (Davidson 2001, 262). This is to understand that some metaphors are not amenable to literal paraphrase, because their content, i.e. what they bring to mind, cannot be delimited. Some metaphors are open-ended. Again, there are several unarticulated assumptions: First, literal meanings and metaphorical meanings are of the same kind, and second, literal language is not open-ended in the same way as metaphors are.

Reply: The open-endedness of metaphorical meaning is guaranteed by the fact that it is derived from literal meaning which is, on Searle's account, open-ended as well. That all metaphors are amenable to literal paraphrases follows from his Principle of Expressibility which can be summarized as "whatever can be meant can be said" (cf. Searle 1969, 17). If the speaker means and wishes to communicate something by a metaphor, then it can be expressed in a literal paraphrase. Davidson's counterargument may be that the speaker might intend to do something other, namely to induce an indefinite (perlocutionary) effect. If so, then the metaphor would not be counted as a pragmatic phenomenon. This is a serious problem for Searle's account, which concerns, however, his basic assumptions rather than his arguments. In the same vein, one could side with Searle and dismiss Davidson's intuition that metaphor belongs to the perlocutionary realm.³

Argument/intuition 6: This argument is based on the intuition that genuine metaphors can be appreciated repeatedly without losing their metaphorical nature. "Novelty is not the issue. In its context a word once taken for a metaphor remains a metaphor on the hundredth hearing, while a word may easily be appreciated in a new literal role on a first encounter. What we call the element of novelty or surprise in a metaphor is a built-in aesthetic feature we can experience again and again, like the surprise in Haydn's Symphony No. 94, or a familiar deceptive cadence" (Davidson 2001, 252). Davidson's intuition is that we could read or hear a metaphor *in the same context of use* repeatedly and its effect might be different on each occasion. If this metaphor had a second meaning (although derived from this context), the effect of this meaning would be always the same. Hence, metaphors have no second meanings.

Reply: If we accepted this intuition, we could ask whether a sentence has the same utterance meaning if it is read or heard repeatedly in the same context. To derive an utterance meaning amounts to identifying the "possible speaker's intentions" (Searle 1979, 93). Utterance meaning

³ Lycan (forthcoming) offers a sort of rapprochement of Searle's and Davidson's accounts. He argues that there is a continuum between metaphors that could be explained pragmatically and metaphors whose point is a perlocutionary effect. It has to be mentioned, however, that although in general sympathetic to Searle's account, he nevertheless thinks that the open-endedness poses a problem here.

is also derived from what the speaker might mean by her utterance, not necessarily from that what she actually means. This might be different in different occasions due to the fact that the shared background assumptions may be different.

To have a complete survey of the controversy in question, let me sketch Davidson's positive account of metaphor, since he left nothing more than a sketch. As already indicated, Davidson sees metaphor as a perlocutionary effect that cannot be explained within semantics or pragmatics. The point of a metaphor exceeds any regular (i.e. rule governed) comprehension. What can be made out of this conviction? Rorty (1987) developed Davidson's views in the way that an explanation of our comprehension of metaphors can be given only in terms of causal connections and psychological associations. But Davidson, following Wittgenstein, also claims that a metaphor lets us *see* one thing *as* another thing. Then what metaphors let us notice is not propositional in focus but nevertheless can be explained as a formal relation between two concepts. And that is much more than a causal effect. Making use of Wittgenstein's analysis of the phenomenon of seeing-as, I have argued in Mácha (2010, 136-142) that in a metaphor "A is B" one can perceive and think of an internal relation between the concepts A and B.

3 An assessment and possibly an improvement of Searle's account

The clash exposed in the previous section can be seen as a clash of intuitions rather than arguments. But the authors that try to develop Searle's account of metaphor further have also raised several objections. The most important one which I am going to address here is that the principles of generating a metaphorical meaning are too vague and not distinctive of metaphor.⁴ The following quotation from Camp (2003, Ch. 1.2) is characteristic: "each of the principles adduced is itself so broad, and the list as a whole comprises so many different ways in which *P* and *R* might be related, that in the end they amount to not much more than the requirement that *P* and *R* must be similar (or just

⁴ Davidson (1979, 262) makes this point in general: "It should make us suspect the theory [of metaphorical meaning] that it is so hard to decide, even in the case of the simplest metaphors, *exactly* what the content is supposed to be" (my emphasis).

related) in some respect or other." These principles cannot be, on the other hand, too rigid, as argued in the reply to Davidson's intuition 1 above. This creates a tension in Searle's account. Camp further argues that the eight principles generate an indefinitely long list of features. These features have to be restricted in the third step to those that are possible features of the metaphorical subject S.

My worry is, then, that due to the vagueness of these principles, all possible features of S will be generated. In each case, these principles could generate a *possible* feature of S that S *actually* has. The upshot of this argument would be that all metaphors are (analytically) true and hence not capable to communicate anything.

If a metaphor should carry some distinctive message about its subject S, this content has to be delimited. It has to be set out what the content is and *what it is not*. The third step of Searle's construction of the metaphorical meaning gives, however, no clues in this respect. Let us take the metaphor "Sam is a pig". Among the features of R generated in the second step might be "greedy" and "slovenly". They are both among the possible features of a person; hence, they will pass through the third step. Then we are left uncertain of the metaphorical meaning. Is it that Sam is a greedy person or that Sam is a slovenly person?

What we also need is a principle that would restrict the features generated in the second step even more. This principle has to delimit which possible features of the metaphorical subject S are parts of the metaphorical meaning and which are not. Only then would the metaphor be capable of being true or false and hence capable of communicating a cognitive content. I have no such principle at hand. However, my suspicion is that it has to take into account more information from the context of use and from the shared background assumptions. If so, then processes of pragmatic inference would contribute to the truth-conditional content of a metaphor. Then we would reveal something like *Grice's Circle* (see Levinson 2000, 186) in the case of metaphors.⁵

There is another objection to Searle's account of metaphor that I would like to address here. It is that his principles are not distinctive of metaphor. They may apply to other figures or indirect speech acts and implicatures. If we leave aside the eager effort to find the essence of

⁵ Consider the metaphor "Death is the mother of beauty" again. Its utterance meaning depends on the implicature "from her, alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams and our desires."

a phenomenon, the non-distinctiveness of the principles could be seen rather as an advantage. Searle gives a single universal mechanism that can be applied when interpreting other figures and linguistic phenomena in general.⁶

It is a matter of philosophical taste whether one wants to have a robust theory of meaning capable of explaining various non-standard phenomena or whether one can strive for a minimalistic theory of meaning that leaves all anomalousness outside.⁷ An in depth discussion of this topic, however, exceeds the scope of the present paper. Davidson's arguments are valid only for the minimalistic conception of (literal) meaning. If one takes a richer account of meaning, as in Searle or in the contemporary contextualism (see, e.g., Bezuidenhout 2001; or Recanati 2001), metaphor can be interpreted as a pragmatic or even a semantic phenomenon.

Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts
Masaryk University
Arna Nováka 1
602 00 Brno
Czech Republic
macha@phil.muni.cz

References

- BEZUIDENHOUT, A. (2001): Metaphor and What is Said: A Defense of a Direct Expression View of Metaphor. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25, 156-186.
BLACK, M. (1955): Metaphor. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, 273-294.
CAMP, E. (2003): *Saying and Seeing-as: The Linguistic Uses and Cognitive Effects of Metaphor*. PhD. Dissertation, UC Berkeley.

-
- ⁶ Camp (2003, Ch. 1.2) reports a personal communication with Searle concerning this objection: "The fact that the principles he [Searle] adduces apply not just to metaphor, but to indirect speech and implicature more generally, should not be seen an objection to his account but as a further advantage of it, he says."
- ⁷ An effort of locating metaphor outside a theory of meaning is expressed in Lepore – Stone (forthcoming): "Progress, we have argued [...], depends on developing and applying clear standards that demarcate semantic phenomena narrowly. If we can locate metaphor elsewhere, it is good news for meaning."

- DAVIDSON, D. (1979): What Metaphors Mean. In: Sacks, S. (ed.): *On Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Reprinted in Davidson, D. (2001): *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Second Ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 245-264. (All citations in the text are from the reprint.)
- LEPORE, E. – STONE, M. (forthcoming): Against Metaphorical meaning. *Topoi*.
- LEVINSON, S. (2000): *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature Language, Speech, and Communication*. Cambridge, (Mass.): The MIT Press.
- LYCAN, W. (forthcoming): An Irenic Idea about Metaphor. *Philosophy*.
- MÁCHA, J. (2010): *Analytische Theorien der Metapher*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- RECANATI, F. (2001): Literal/Nonliteral. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25, 264-274.
- REIMER, M. (2001): Davidson on Metaphor. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25, 142-155.
- RORTY, R. (1987): Unfamiliar Noises I: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Supplement volume 61, 283-296.
- SEARLE, J. (1969): *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SEARLE, J. (1979): Metaphor. In: Ortony, A. (ed.): *Metaphor and Thought*. First Ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STEVENS, W. (2006): *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.