

You get what you give: metaphor and proportionality

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Motto:
“The unspeakability of nature is the very possibility of language.”
James P. Carse

1. Introduction

The act of speech involves the operation of discursive schematisation destined to influence the interlocutor, to make him or her accept and adopt new ideas and attitudes which are *programmed* by the initiator of the speech act, who wants his or her interlocutor to act in a certain way. When you speak, you want the other to believe you. In order to believe, one has to understand. So, the speaker should make sure that the hearer has the best of chances to get to the message contained in a speech act. What is the part of the speaker and what is left to the hearer? How much is convention and how much is innovation in linguistic communication? Do we all get the same thing - I mean *the same* thing! - out of a linguistic expression? We strongly believe that an infinity of nuances are involved in the catching of the meaning of any discourse. Naturally, when dealing with metaphoric expressions, we face a much greater diversity of nuances in understanding: theoretically, there can be no perfectly similar readings of the same metaphor. This is because the hearer (or receiver) contributes his or her part to the enriching of words meaning by adding (or by eliminating) connotations and this comes from his or her own experience.

2. Framework

When one reads the Prologue to the Gospel according to St. John with a view to ever better understanding its message, one finds the Unique Creator putting order into Chaos, according to the significance of a pre-existing (Stănculescu 1995: 218) discourse:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.”

We have here the image of the Cosmos as discourse produced by a “natural semantics” (the Creation as Logos), a discourse such as it is projected in a human semioticsⁱ. It is the faith of archaic man in the existence of an omnipresent, omnipotent, ordering divinity, which makes the world reveal itself *as* and *across* language, fact which provokes an endless semiosis, which is the mythⁱⁱ. The myth would then be the reflection of a certain natural processuality, a quasi-text (Stănculescu 1995: 219) of the text produced by the Logos Creator, or rather a multitude of such quasi-texts, all sharing one common characteristic: they are a mixture of the *poetic* discourse and of the *scientific*, or *philosophical* discourseⁱⁱⁱ.

At the intersection of the three types of discourse we undertake a reconsideration of metaphor, emphasizing not its ornamental value, but its cognitive one. Even though, taking into account what we have stated above, the metaphor is not integrable into the scientific/philosophical discourse, as it belongs to the poetical discourse^{iv}, given the intimate interpenetrating of the two types of discourse in the myth, we shall try to “measure” the participation of this element of poetic discourse against the myth’s anchorage onto the *ontos*. This will also enable us to circumscribe the reality of what seems to be nothing more than fiction.

The fact that the resemblance between model and metaphor (i.e. epistemological concept/poetical concept) has already been established (Black 1962: 219-243) is encouraging for our present research. Certainly, our interest is to see the effect provoked by the relation which exists between metaphor and reality as, according to Black, the model plays within the scientific language the same role that the metaphor plays within the poetical language, namely is an instrument which seeks to replace an inadequate interpretation by another, more adequate one. Paul Ricoeur points out to us (Ricoeur 1975: 302) that the metaphor is an heuristic instrument which does not belong to the logic of argumentation, but to the logic of exploration (*logique de la découverte*, in Fr; in the orig.) With Ricoeur the model appears as a psychology of invention coupled with a cognitive process (i.e. a rational method having its own principles). The model is only accurate in its *pertinent features* (P.F.). The correlatives of these - the *interpretive conventions* (I.C.) govern their reading. They are like rules. Rules which govern the translation of a system of relations into another, i.e. the glissade of isomorphisms^v (P.F.) within the framework of a symmetrical relation^{vi}. After we can operate on a better known object, richer in implications and hence more fertile at the level of the hypothesis. We can now more easily understand the comparison - accepted by us - between metaphor and model. This comparison goes back to Aristotle^{vii} and, as far as metaphor is concerned, it has no other utility but to facilitate comprehension of the latter’s functioning. In the myth, the model of the real world becomes prototype of the imaginary and this isomorphism

defines itself as an act of culture, through its semiotic treatment: a form taken from the phenomenological field will signify something different from its own substance (Meslin 1975: part 2, chap. 3). It is therefore the heuristic function of the metaphor that we are interested in, the manner in which it re-describes reality. The metaphor does not destroy an order of being to invent another, even though there is in its usage a moment of *deconstruction* which allows for the passage from the description to the re-description of reality; it encloses in itself information about real facts and it is from a pragmatic perspective that it should be properly approached if we are to appreciate the effects and the implications - cognitive and otherwise - of its usage by a speaker in a certain context.

But, does the usage of metaphor ever teach us anything? In order for an input of information to exist, there has first got to be a reference point^{viii}. Or, a metaphorical reference point would rather be constituted from “the poetical schemata of the inner life” and the reality of poetical textures. According to Paul Ricoeur, a poetical scheme (Fr. *schéma poétique*, cf. Ricoeur 1975: 309-310) is the phenomenon which can be visualized (in reality or just in the imagination) in order to express something of the intimate life of man, or of a non-spatial reality in general. This scheme is the equivalent of the “états d’âme” which Northrop Frye holds as substitutes for all referents, and it finds support in the textural reality. It is precisely this *correspondence* between the two which expresses the reciprocity between the *inner* and the *exterior*, and it is this reciprocity that the metaphor operates on, leading from a state of confusion and indistinction towards a very well defined bipolar tension. At the two ends of this tension axis is the thing by means of which the telling is being done, i.e. two fundamentally different entities, but which are made to correspond by a subtle mechanism which connects the *resemblant* with its irreducible *dissemblable*. And that is what the metaphor means! Actually, language itself is a metaphor, for, according to James P. Carse, no matter what it means to do, it is but language, and it remains completely other than the thing it treats of. Somehow in reverse way, Beardsley leaves the generality imposed by “language” and says that “the metaphor is a poem in miniature” (Beardsley 1958: 134), and it says something about something.

3. Perspectives on Metaphor and “Cognitive Truth”

Lest we should risk straying from the stream of consciousness, we return to the problem which preoccupies us: the truth - if truth there be! - which is hidden behind metaphor and the proper way to find access to it. The only provision is that such an attempt involves approaching the problem from several perspectives, so that we may finally obtain the metaphor’s hologram image. These manifold perspectives constitute as many views upon the question under study, yet they are views which do not annul each other.

3.1. In line with Max Black (Black 1955) for whom everything is a matter of projection (the metaphor functioning by means of the *interaction* of two schemata, i.e. a projection from a schema of concepts, of ideas or of commonplaces towards something which belongs not to that schema), we may place M. C. Beardsley, for whom this scheme relies on the transmission of irrelevant semantic features.

3.2. On the other hand, there is the “quarrel” between positions such as those hold by Donald Davidson and H. G. Gadamer. The former attributes only a persuasive or *decorative function* to metaphor while maintaining that a metaphorical sense does not exist (Gadamer 1975), whereas for the latter, the metaphor is the primary and original conveyor of meaning^{ix}.

3.3. For their part, the philosophers - Cassirer, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Quine, Freud, Ricoeur, Lakoff - see in the metaphor a mechanism which is governed by a much larger theory which involves the human being, the world, the culture. This *anthropological perspective* tries to open the way towards finding the origins of language by considering the place that the human being occupies in the universe (the place/space of the body and of the spirit, the role of faiths and of human actions).

3.4. Finally, there is what might be called “*the vision of comparison*”, whereby we are invited to see in metaphor a more or less implicit comparison.

3.5. It would be difficult to fit all these five directions in one and the same discussion, unless we perfect a matrix which would let nothing be lost of the five perspectives, contents nor quality. It seems evident that the role of such a matrix, which we can call the “*cognitive truth* of metaphor” is to be such that it allows each of the five positions to be articulated in terms of it; more, this articulation should not lead to a loss of content and clarity of any of the five perspectives^x. A discussion on this problem could either treat metaphor in general, or the metaphor as origin of the truth or as element inescapably leading to the truth in specific domains (such as sciences, arts, humanities).

It is opposite for us to mention that our need of truthfulness is something contextual and that metaphor plays its role, if need be, in making the truth come to the surface, that this same truth is a matter of emotion, of persuasion or of cognition, or of all these simultaneously. “To be in the truth” is a Kierkegaardian concept which best renders the relationship which involves the human being (with his need for truthfulness), the world (which comprises the human being) and the truth (which is the truthful image of the world, image of which the human being is in permanent quest)^{xi}. The truth, from this perspective, appears as a product which derives from a certain type of behaviour, from a type of relation between the human being and the world. In this view, the metaphor is simultaneously *a part* of the world and an instrument enabling one to approach the world in order to withhold its truth (Cooper 1993). As a fundamental form of language, metaphor presents that of which it speaks as an *as if represented* thing. The point is that it is concerned more with *the manner of presenting* the truth rather than with presenting *the truth itself*. As if, aware of the incapacity of language to render accurately the order of the natural world, we would limit ourselves to “paraphrasing” the Original Discourse. Which brings us back to the myth!

4. Case study

Let's take *The Holy Bible*^{xii} and try to account for the usage of the word "father" in this text. By saying "the usage of the word ..." we have explicitly declared our intention to analyze the effect that the occurrence of this word might have on the audience of this biblical text.

First of all, "father" is employed in the *Bible* both in its literal sense and in its metaphorical one. A taxonomical study^{xiii} would reveal one first difficulty: in the ancient Judaic society^{xiv} "father" meant not only "natural father" but also "forefather", "male parents of preceding generations" and also "tutor", "spiritual father", "chief". Of the many occurrences of the term "father" where the meaning is not "God", an indisputable majority is taken by the metaphorical meanings, which fact prevents us from assuming that there be such a dichotomy as "natural father"(literal sense)/"God-the-Father (metaphorical sense). It is nevertheless very important to try and detect the cognitive truth of metaphors other than "God-the-Father", as such an enterprise would ensure the proper perception of this last. Here we have, besides the literal meaning, a whole constellation of metaphorical meanings, but not yet the meaning of "God as father". Concerning this last we point out a further difficulty: as "father of Jesus", God-the-father is not a father in the current sense of the word, as Jesus-the-child is the fruit of grace (of the Holy Spirit). All the same, if we put God-the-father-of-Jesus in the same category with natural father, there are, in the Bible, approximately 50% literal usages (A) and 50% metaphorical usages (B)^{xv} of the term "father". It follows that there are further possibilities to notice the cognitive contribution of the metaphor "father", when we compare it with the information we get from the literal usages of this term.

The pertinent features of the concept - such as they arise from a comparative analysis of the two usages of the term - inform us about what "father" meant in the Judaic society of the epoch and this is what we shall call the "current sense". Besides being the fundamental principle of family unity^{xvi}, the father was also:

- the absolute authority within the boundaries of his own family, as in (A): "and his father that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth" (Zach. 13.3) and also as in (B): "but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12.49)
- the main moral reference point, as in (A): "the father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice" (Proverbs 23.24), or as in (B): "Them shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13.43)
- he who ensures the formation and education of children^{xvii}, as in (A): "a fool despiseth his father's instruction" (Proverbs 15.5), or as in (B): "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do" (John 5.19);
- the source and pledge of life, as in (A): "we are orphans and fatherless" (Lamentations 5.3) or as in (B): "God, the Father, of whom are all things" (I Cor 8.6).

More than that, the father, within the Jewish culture, was the man who ensured the material subsistence of his family, able to perform deeds that no one else in the family was able to accomplish; the father was the only person having the right to invest the other members of the family with powers that it seemed right for him to invest them with and also - and especially! - the father was the ideal of perfection that each of the children considered it his duty to pursue for their whole life, as in (B): "be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5.48).

The transfer of PFs from the phenomenological field circumscribed by (A) towards the one circumscribed by (B) is made neither by accident nor at random: God himself is the one who imposes it, as if to aid his people that he had chosen according to his own prescience (cf. I Peter 1.2) so that they better understand that which they were to see in their Creator: their *father*^{xviii}.

As a matter of fact, all the information arising from the metaphorical usage of father comes to complement that which any individual person (again, from the Indo-European cultural area) knows right away about the Creator, at least that God-the-Father pre-exists him or her, and he did something that made him or her come to existence. This is how people come to see in God not only the source of everything that exists, but also the supreme authority. In order to express this in metaphor-comparison terms, we shall say that: what a father is to his family, God is to us all. Or, as Aristotle pointed out in his *Poetics* (1457b 6-20), this is the proportional metaphor^{xix}, which functions according to the rule:

B is in comparison with A that which
D is in comparison with C.

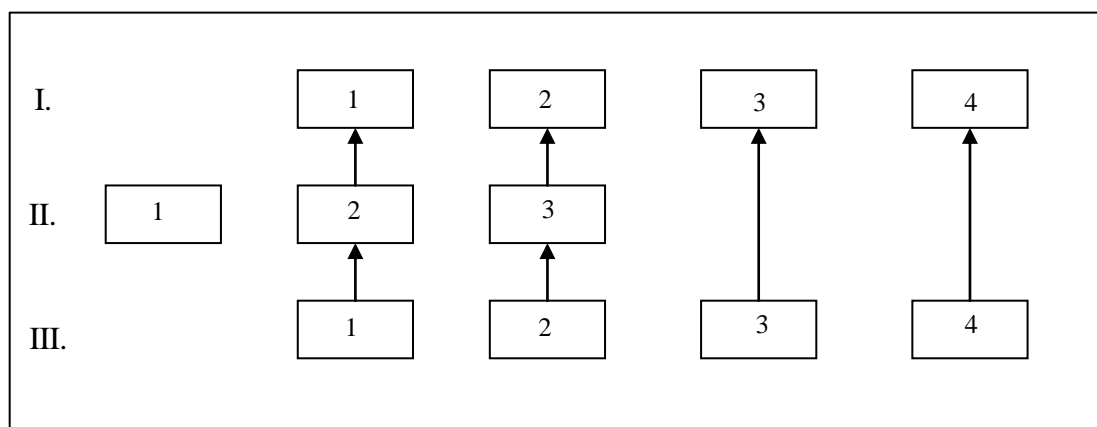
Filling in a semantic gap is one of the functions of metaphor. Yet the idea of “discourse” presupposes not only text construction (which to the speaker), but also text analysis (which falls to the hearer/reader). The encoding of the message - which includes the usage of metaphor - is followed by a decoding and each of these stages presupposes gains and losses in connotations facilitated by extralinguistic factors such as, among others, the cultural accumulations of the participants in the speech act. Hence, here we have a further proportional comparison:

T_M shall say about O_1 to R that which
 T_L says about O to R

where T_M is the term used in its metaphorical sense, T_L the term used in literal sense, O_1 the *referent* of T_M , O - the *referent* of T_L , and R - the *receiver* (see the explanations for the diagram below).

Should we now envisage the two proportions as segments of one and the same process, we would have a fuller and ampler view of the functioning of metaphor. It is true that the PFs are almost the same for the *sender* (S) and for the *receiver* (R), due to the interpretative conventions (IC); yet both S and R would bring in a personal contribution which is practically impossible to detect from the outside, which is hidden from the eyes of others, but which would be the most important “profit” drawn from the usage of metaphor. When we say “B is in comparison with A that which D is in comparison with C”, we can never be sure that D be in comparison with C the same thing - *exactly the same thing!* - for all the parties concerned.

This happens as suggested by the following diagram:



where level II should be considered as a ground level, for it contains the characteristic features of the notion “father” in its current sense (see above for “current sense”). We propose for this level PFs like:

- II.1. someone involved in my guidance
- II.2. someone who was there before my time
- II.3. someone who did something that made me exist.

Level I represents the features attributed by transfer, metaphorically, to God (in our case) whereas level III represents characteristic features such as a random individual would attribute to the notion “father” and hence - by transfer - to the notion “God”, e.g.:

- III.1. someone somehow related to me and older than I am
- III.2. someone who created me, biologically or not
- III.3. someone who punishes me
- III.4. someone who imposes himself on me without any explanation.

The last two squares of level I are to be observed: they represent the features which belong with the PFs of the notion “God” *only* and *exclusively* for the particular case of the individual for whom “father” is composed of PF from level III. Still for this particular case, the fact is to be observed that the individual in question ignores a PF of the ground definition of the term “father” (which is shown in the diagram by the first square of level II which is not contained in the transfer from level II to level I, for it does not have a correspondent in level III). On the contrary, that which is usually understood by “father” employed metaphorically finds itself enriched by two features which do not exist among the elements in level II (the ground level), and this happens in *commun*-ication.

Father is the “symbol of the generative power, of domination, of value” (Chevalier 1995: 740) Paul Ricouer attributes the richness of this symbol to its transcendence potential (in *De l'interprétation*, Paris, 1966): symbolically, the father is less a generator at the same level with the mother, as he is the giver of laws (Chevalier 1995:741). The father is not only the being that one wants to possess or to have; but is also the being that one wants to be able to become, to be, or to equal in worth (Chevalier 1995: 741). Beyond all this, for each of us, father means something which is very personal, very intimate, something which we cannot share nor do we want to share with others, but which, nevertheless, necessarily obliges us to transfer to the divinity. Therefore it emerges that for each of us, God is *father* in the complete sense that each of us can give to the notion “father” when used in its literal sense.

5. Conclusions

We could conclude by saying that when someone says “Our Father who are in heaven”, then he or she “receives” an image of our Lord which is perfectly proportionate to his/her own contribution to the metaphor *father*. This goes also for the culture-dependent understanding of metaphorical constructions in discourse. Under this perspective, it is easier to explain the fact that within a given culture, the metaphorical use of a term is differently understood from what it is within another culture, or even it is not understood at all: the PFs are not exactly the same or they are not there at all.

And again, connotations are a very personal thing, that rely on the personal experience each of us accumulates; metaphors function on the basis of connotations; so, metaphors are a very personal thing.

Good God is our God, to *all of us*, but rather *to each of us, proportionately*.

Notes

ⁱ The human semiotics consists in an imperfect discourse. The lack of perfection comes from the incapacity of human mind to capture the originary *Logos Creator*. This is how we get to use words like “beginning” or “end”, which express our world as we can control it through our language. Even taking for granted the fact that texts like the *Scripture* were “induced” to some human minds in order to be spread among men, the intuitive knowledge was first put into human language patterns, and that was when the initial perfection was altered.

ⁱⁱ The paradigmatic nature of myth interpretation (apud Claude Lévi-Strauss) over the syntagmatic construction of the practical level of the text brings the myth to the status of just another semiotics, with its own syntax and semantics.

ⁱⁱⁱ We refer here to the distinction Ch. W. Morris proposed in the systematics of discursivity he constructed in his *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (Morris 1971: 75-397, especially chapter V - *Types of Discourse* - pp. 203-268), systematics based upon the criterion of signification (the capacity of signs build as signs texts to offer the receiver a description of the object or of the denoted situation), and on the criterion of use (what purpose a discursive sequence is used for), where the three types of discourse (poetical, scientific, and philosophical) are to be found at the intersection of evaluative sequences with the appreciative ones (poetical discourse), of the informative sequences with the designative ones (scientific discourse), and of the formative sequences with the systemic ones (philosophical discourse).

^{iv} It is true that the metaphor - as the case may be for the major part of the figures - is to be found in the everyday language, and we keep in mind the malicious remark of Du Marsais, who once said that much more numerous figures are created in one market day than in an academic reunion. Although it has been taken as an ornament for a very long period of time, the metaphor was never separated from its cognitive functioning cultural communication, in the sense of stressing, emphasizing some idea, or in the sense of revealing an enigmatic situation beneath a metaphorical communication. Its presence in a discourse brings a new status, kind of a certificate of “scientificity” which gives value and importance to a discourse. It is true that the metaphor is characteristic for the poetical discourse, but we shouldn’t forget that lately they talk of a “stylistics of the scientific practice” (Granger 1988), and that the problem of the metaphor in philosophical discourse has been analyzed by the greatest philosophical minds (Derrida 1972: 249-324, and Ricoeur 1975: chap. *Métaphore et discours philosophique*).

^v Here, ‘*isomorphism*’ is used with the sense of formal identity of two or more structures which are from different levels.

^{vi} A ‘*symmetrical relation*’ is a relation of the kind of “for any couple (x’y), xRy=yRx”.

^{vii} In his *Poetics*, Aristotle speaks about metaphor as of the adventure of a word, an adventure which is connected, by means of lexis, to the “poetics” (*poiesis*) of the historical drama; with Aristotle the comparison *mythos/mimesis* (in the tragedy poetics) corresponds to the comparison *heuristic fiction/re-description* (in the theory of models).

^{viii} In his paper *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* - which became a steady point of reference - G.Frege distinguishes between *meaning* (Sinn) and *reference* (Bedeutung) at different levels of discursivity: nouns (terms), asertoric sentences, subordinate sentences. By *meaning* he understands the way the reference is brought to the conscience of the receiver, and by *reference* he understands the reality called by the sense, with the specification that the signification of sentences is their truth value. The issue will be developed by Rudolf Carnap in the distinction between intension and extension (see R. Carnap 1947)

^{ix} The point of view of the primordially of metaphor indicates that the research has been actually pursued with a view to discovering the origin of language and of its fundamental nature. One can find this idea in Nietzsche, before Gadamer.

^x On this matter, see F. R. Ankersmit & J. J. A. Mooij 1993: 1-17

^{xi} We only invoke Kierkegaard here, with no particular reference to the analysis J. Ries gives of the *silence* in Kierkegaard's philosophy. The conception of "being in the truth" gives way to understand the truth not only as a correspondence between language and real world, but also as something coming from the relation of man to the world, and the metaphor can exemplify this deeper notion of truth.

^{xii} All biblical references of the English version of this paper are to the *Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version, Glasgow, William Collins & Sons Co. Ltd, 1946.

^{xiii} Information obtained by the consultation of the analytical and analogical index *Table pastorale de la Bible*, by G. Passelecq and F. Poswick (Paris, P. Lethielleux, Ed., 1987).

1. ^{xiv} For the applied analysis, we shall refer to the *Bible* and, implicitly, to the ancient Jewish world and culture, which are of an Indo-European type. The words and the concepts we deal with are to be taken in relation with this cultural area. As the cultural pattern we rely on is Indo-European, we kindly ask that our discourse should be read under this assumption. The vocabulary reflects the nature of the society using it, as pointed out by E. Coseriu in his *Introducción a la lingüística*: "The common Indo-European lexic makes us think of a patriarchal society based upon the "big family" (or the "family clan") and characterized by a strictly aristocratic organization". For culture free concepts and language universals, we suggest J. Greenberg (Greenberg 1971) and E. Coseriu (Coseriu 1974). For inter-cultural communication, we suggest A. Wierzbicka, in this volume, on the analysis of culture-bounded concepts in semantic components.

^{xv} The notation "A" and "B" will be used throughout this paper with the same meaning.

^{xvi} "Family" also signified "clan" and "tribe", which were larger units of the population, organized accordingly to the parenthood principle.

^{xvii} Here "children" has no connection with young age, but is the second term of the pair "parent-children".

^{xviii} cf. "Thou shalt call me, My father; and shalt not turn away from me" (Jer. 3.19).

^{xix} Generally, the metaphor contains an analogic reasoning. With reference to W. A. de Pater, we consider we are here in presence of the analogy of proportionality, in which case the name is common, but the definition corresponding is partially different and partially the same (namely according to a similarity of proportions).

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