

‘Metaphorically’

This paper argues that every metaphor has a literal paraphrase, because although not every metaphor is paraphrasable by a corresponding simile, every metaphor can be paraphrased by prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to it. The literal paraphrase of ‘Juliet is the sun’, for example, is ‘metaphorically, Juliet is the sun’.

It might be argued that every metaphor has a literal paraphrase because the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of a corresponding simile. The figurative meaning of ‘Juliet is the sun’, according to this proposal, is simply the literal meaning of ‘Juliet is like the sun’ (Davidson, 1978, 253).

There are two problems with this proposal. The first is that the aptness of a metaphor may differ from the truth of the corresponding simile. ‘Juliet is the sun’, for example, is apt only if Juliet is pretty, but ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true even if Juliet isn’t pretty (Davidson, 1978, 254). Both are alike, for example, in being partly hydrogen.

Likewise, ‘no man is an island’ is apt, but the corresponding simile, ‘no man is like an island’, is false – because some men are like islands. The island I inhabit and I are alike, for example, because we are both moving at the same velocity. So ‘no man is like an island’ is not a good paraphrase of ‘no man is an island’.

‘Charlie is a prince’ may be apt only if Charlie is vain, but ‘Charlie is like a prince’ is true even if Charlie is not vain, because Charlie is a prince and like himself. ‘Juliet is the sun’ is apt even if ‘the sun is Juliet’ is not, but since likeness is symmetric, ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true if and only if ‘the sun is like Juliet’ is (Beardsley, 1962, 297).

Finally, ‘Margie is an iron lady’ is apt, but ‘Margie is like an iron lady’ is false, since for it to be true there would have to be an iron lady who Margie is like, but there is no such iron lady. Similes cannot be true without likening their subjects to existents, but the corresponding metaphors may still be apt (Tirrell, 1991, 343).

Two clarifications. First, ‘Juliet is like the sun’ might seem to be a good paraphrase of ‘Juliet is the sun’ since somebody who says ‘Juliet is like the sun’ means that Juliet is

like the sun in respect of prettiness, rather than in respect of being partly hydrogen. Likewise, no man is like an island in relevant respects, which exclude velocity.

‘Charlie is like a prince’ isn’t used to mean merely that Charlie is like some prince or other but that he is like other princes in the particular respect of vanity. And saying ‘Juliet is like the sun’ emphasises salient properties of the sun, whereas saying ‘the sun is like Juliet’ emphasises salient properties of Juliet (Fogelin, 1988, 61-6).

But this doesn’t show that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of a simile, since what similes are used to mean is not what they mean literally. At most it shows that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the figurative meaning of a simile, which falls short of literal paraphrasability (Davidson, 1978, 254-5).

Second, the point that aptness of metaphor may differ from truth of simile does not rely on the thesis that everything resembles everything – it may be, for example, that there’s no respect whatsoever in which ravens resemble writing desks – but only on the analysis of resemblance as sharing properties (contra Fogelin, 1988, 56-60).

If properties are abundant, then it follows that everything is like everything, and every simile is vacuously true. But even if properties are not abundant, the above points still go through. Being partly hydrogen, for example, is a fundamental physical property, so ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true even on the sparsest theories (Armstrong, 1978).

Because velocities are fundamental physical properties, ‘no man is like an island’ is false on the sparsest theories of properties even if ‘no man is an island’ is apt. ‘Charlie is like a prince’ is true regardless of which properties there are, since Charlie is like a prince – himself – in respect of every property he has.

Likewise, since likeness is symmetric, ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true if and only if ‘the sun is like Juliet’ is true regardless of what properties there are, since all properties Juliet shares with the sun are properties the sun shares with Juliet. Nonetheless, ‘Juliet is the sun’ may be apt when ‘the sun is Juliet’ is not.

Finally, since something must exist in order to have properties, ‘Margie is like an iron lady’ is false regardless of what properties there are, since for it to be true there would have to be an iron lady for Margie to share those properties with, but there is no such iron lady. Whether or not properties are sparse makes no difference to these points.

It might be objected that a simile’s literal meaning is context-dependent (Camp, 2006, 12). Something is like another if and only if they have some property in common. If the domain of ‘some’ in this analysis is not unrestricted but context-dependent, then the literal meaning of similes may be similarly context-dependent.

Just as it may be literally false to say ‘there’s some beer’ if there’s no beer in the esky, but there is beer in the supermarket, it may be literally false to say ‘Juliet is like the sun’ if Juliet isn’t pretty, but like the sun in respect of being partly hydrogen, because the domain of quantification might be restricted to exclude being partly hydrogen.

Likewise, it may be literally true to say ‘no man is like an island’ although the island I inhabit and I are moving at the same velocity, since ‘no man is like an island’ may be uttered in a context in which velocities are excluded from properties quantified over. If so, ‘no man is like an island’ might be a literal paraphrase of ‘no man is an island’.

But this response does not generalise to the other cases. ‘Charlie is like a prince’ is true regardless of which properties are in the domain of quantification, since Charlie is a prince and he shares all his properties, whether or not they are in the domain, with himself. Nevertheless ‘Charlie is a prince’ may not be apt.

Likewise, since likeness is symmetric, ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true if and only if ‘the sun is like Juliet’ is true regardless of what properties are quantified over, since every property Juliet shares with the sun is a property the sun shares with Juliet. But ‘Juliet is the sun’ may still be apt when ‘the sun is Juliet’ is not.

Finally, since something must exist in order to have properties, ‘Margie is like an iron lady’ is false regardless of what properties are quantified over, since for it to be true there would have to be some property in the domain which Margie shares with an iron lady, but since there’s no such iron lady, there’s no such property whatsoever.

The second problem is that not all metaphors have corresponding similes. ‘Philosophy is deep’ can’t be paraphrased by ‘philosophy is like deep’, since the latter isn’t a simile even in idiolects in which it’s grammatical. Instead, ‘philosophy is deep’ would have to be paraphrased by ‘philosophy is like something deep’ (Tirrell, 1991, 347).

Likewise, ‘take the bull by the horns’, for example, has to be paraphrased not as ‘take the bull like by the horns’, but as ‘do something like taking the bull by the horns’. And the paraphrase of ‘the ATM swallowed my card’ would have to be something like ‘the ATM did something like swallowing to my card’.

The underlying problem is that ‘like’ is a word which modifies a noun phrase to make an adjective. But not every metaphor contains a noun phrase which can be modified in this way, so before a corresponding simile can be found, a noun phrase must be added to the metaphor. But it’s unclear whether this can always be done.

The following example of a metaphor for which a corresponding simile cannot be found by adding an appropriate noun phrase for ‘like’ to modify is given by Davidson (1978, 253): ‘A highbrow is a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in search of an idea’.

The most obvious correspondent simile is: ‘A highbrow is like a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in search of an idea’. But this simile is false, because since there’s no such thing as a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence, a highbrow cannot be like one.

Davidson’s (1978, 253) own suggestion is: “A highbrow is a man or woman whose intelligence is like a thoroughbred horse and who persists in thinking about an idea like a rider galloping across country in pursuit of ... well, something.” The paraphrase resulting from adding noun phrases for ‘like’ to modify here is unacceptably clumsy.

So not every metaphor can be literally paraphrased by a simile. But every metaphor has a literal paraphrase, because the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal

meaning of ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to it. The figurative meaning of ‘Juliet is the sun’, for example, is the literal meaning of ‘metaphorically Juliet is the sun’.

Paraphrasing metaphors by prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to them overcomes both of the objections to paraphrasing metaphors with similes. First, the aptness of the metaphor cannot differ from the truth of prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to it, since ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to a statement is true if and only if that statement is an apt metaphor.

Just as ‘Juliet is the sun’, for example, is apt only if Juliet is pretty, ‘metaphorically Juliet is the sun’ is true only if Juliet is pretty: if Juliet were not pretty but like the sun in respect of the property of being partly hydrogen, ‘Juliet is like the sun’ would still be true but ‘metaphorically Juliet is the sun’ would not be true.

Likewise, the aptness of ‘no man is an island’ differs from the truth of ‘no man is like an island’, since the former is apt but the latter, because the island I inhabit and I are alike in respect of velocity, is false. But the aptness of ‘no man is an island’ cannot differ from the truth of ‘metaphorically no man is an island’.

‘Charlie is like a prince’ is true even if Charlie is not vain, but ‘metaphorically Charlie is a prince’ is true if and only if ‘Charlie is a prince’ is apt. ‘Juliet is like the sun’ is true if and only if ‘the sun is like Juliet’, but it’s possible that ‘metaphorically, Juliet is the sun’ is true while ‘metaphorically, the sun is Juliet’ is not.

Finally, just as for ‘Holmes lived in Baker street’ to be true Holmes must exist, but for ‘in the fiction Holmes lived in Baker street’ to be true he need not exist (Lewis, 1978, 262), for ‘Margie is like an iron lady’ to be true there must be an iron lady, but for ‘metaphorically, Margie is an iron lady’ to be true there needn’t be an iron lady.

Second, every metaphor corresponds to a statement beginning ‘metaphorically’, since whereas ‘like’ modifies a noun phrase to form an adjective, ‘metaphorically’ modifies a sentence to form another sentence. Since all metaphors are sentences, all metaphors can be modified in this way.

The paraphrase of ‘philosophy is deep’, for example, is ‘metaphorically philosophy is deep’. The paraphrase of ‘the ATM swallowed my card’ is ‘metaphorically the ATM swallowed my card’. The paraphrase of ‘take the bull by the horns’ is ‘metaphorically take the bull by the horns’.

The paraphrase of ‘a highbrow is a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in search of an idea’ is ‘metaphorically, a highbrow is a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in search of an idea’.

Four objections. First, if the figurative meaning of a metaphor was the literal meaning of a corresponding simile, this would furnish a reductive analysis of metaphorical meaning in terms of literal meaning, since we could hope to analyse the literal meaning of similes without appealing to figurative meaning (Tirrell, 1991, 342).

But the thesis that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to it doesn’t furnish a reductive analysis of figurative in terms of literal meaning, because we can’t hope to analyse the literal meaning of ‘metaphorically’ without appealing to figurative meaning (Camp, 2006, 12).

In other words, a metaphor does not have its figurative meaning in virtue of the literal meaning of ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to it, but vice versa: ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to a sentence has its literal meaning in virtue of that sentence’s figurative meaning. So the thesis does not furnish a reductive analysis of metaphorical meaning.

Even so, the thesis that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to it is still important, because it shows that figurative meanings are not different in kind from literal meanings: it cannot be that figurative meanings differ from literal meanings in being non-propositional, for example.

Second, it might be objected that the literal meaning of ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to a sentence cannot be the metaphorical meaning of the sentence, because the literal meaning of a sentence depends compositionally on the literal meaning of its parts – not the figurative meaning of one of its parts.

But the fact that the literal meaning of a sentence depends compositionally on the literal meaning of its parts doesn't undermine the thesis that the literal meaning of 'metaphorically' prefixed to a sentence depends on the metaphorical meaning of the sentence, since the metaphorical meaning itself depends on the literal meaning.

In other words, the literal meaning of 'metaphorically' prefixed to a sentence depends on the literal meaning of that sentence in the same way as the figurative meaning of that sentence depends on its literal meaning. So it's consistent with compositionality that every metaphor can be paraphrased by prefixing 'metaphorically' to it.

Third, whether a metaphor is apt depends on context. So it's not true strictly speaking that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of 'metaphorically' prefixed to it, but instead that the figurative meaning of a metaphor in a context is the literal meaning of 'metaphorically' prefixed to it in that same context.

'Juliet is the sun', for example, may have been apt in the context Will wrote in, but is not apt in the context of global warming. But 'metaphorically, Juliet is the sun' is still true in the context Will wrote in if and only if it was apt in the context Will wrote in, rather than if and only if it is apt in the context of global warming.

So some metaphors may lack paraphrases in the current context: if we are now in the context of global warming, for example, it may not be possible to paraphrase Will's utterance of 'Juliet is the sun' by uttering 'metaphorically, Juliet is the sun', because Will's utterance may have been apt even if ours is false.

Nevertheless, every metaphor is still paraphrasable in principle, since every metaphor has a literal paraphrase in the context in which it was uttered. Even if we are unable to paraphrase Will's utterance of 'Juliet is the sun', for example, it was possible for Will to paraphrase his utterance, simply by prefixing 'metaphorically' to it.

Fourth, in the case of a metaphor with many figurative meanings it's not true strictly speaking that its figurative meaning is the literal meaning of 'metaphorically' prefixed

to it, but instead that the figurative meanings of the metaphor are the literal meanings of ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to it.

So a sentence formed by prefixing ‘metaphorically’ to a second sentence might be ambiguous in a way which does not result from lexical ambiguity in its components, nor from any syntactic ambiguity. This is unusual, but it no way undermines the thesis that every metaphor has a literal paraphrase.

To paraphrase Davidson (1978, 254), metaphors are often very difficult to interpret and, so it is said, impossible to paraphrase. But with the thesis that the figurative meaning of a metaphor is the literal meaning of ‘metaphorically’ prefixed to it, paraphrase, if not interpretation, is typically ready to hand of the most callow.

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