

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LEXICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF METAPHORICITY USING CORPUS METHODS

Abstract. This paper investigates the limitations of the umbrella-term ‘metaphor’, and specifically, its ineffectiveness at distinguishing between the various linguistic traits that characterise metaphoricity. The research uses corpus data in order to explore some of the types of lexical behaviour evident in metaphoric language. It is argued that Hoey’s [2005] Theory of Lexical Priming offers an effective way of investigating lexical metaphor, by allowing the organisation of metaphoric language based upon lexical patterns and tendencies. These are collocation, colligation, semantic association and pragmatic association. A detailed study of the metaphors FLAME, and GREW will be presented to demonstrate this.

Keywords. metaphor, lexicography, collocation, colligation, Lexical Priming Theory, 19th Century corpora.

1. Introduction

In recent research, the term ‘metaphoricity’ is being increasingly adopted as a way of addressing metaphoric language from the point of view of a cline theory rather than a strict dichotomy. This paper argues that whilst a dichotomy is ineffective term for such a complex linguistic phenomenon, the decision of whether a word or phrase is metaphoric is neither as straightforward as a single-tier cline suggests. The notion of ‘metaphoric meaning’ has further reaching implications on our language understanding and use than is commonly discussed. Metaphor, like any other type of language, is often subjective and highly dependent on factors specific to time period, genre, environment of the speakers or writers, and context.

These factors are accounted for by what Hoey [2005] terms ‘primings’ and Hanks [2004] terms as ‘norms’. In addition, and on a more abstract level, personal experience and judgment are also

crucial factors in addressing and understanding meaning, whether metaphoric or literal [Phillip 2011]. Curiously, these are factors not often taken into consideration in current metaphoric research. Approaching metaphor from a lexical stance, the research uses corpus methods to reveal the multi-level complexity surrounding the varieties of ‘metaphoric meaning’. In particular, the research focuses on frequent clusters, colligations, collocations, and pragmatic associations such as prosody, to highlight the lexical patterns of metaphor and more widely, to draw attention to the inadequacy of the umbrella term ‘metaphor’ when dealing with language behaviour.

The theory of Lexical Priming [Hoey 2005] will be adopted as a way of providing an explanation for, and giving insight into, the fuzziness of ‘metaphoricity’. Importantly, rather than seeing metaphoricity as something inherent within a word or phrase, this research looks instead at the idea of metaphoricity as a crack in the primings or expectations of language users, at both a collective and individual level. Subsequently, the more a metaphor is used, the more it then develops its own primings that we come to expect as language users. This investigation looks into evidence of these primings within corpus data.

2. Aims of the research

The paper will firstly discuss some key concerns with identifying and defining metaphoricity in terms of lexical, semantic, grammatical and pragmatic manifestations. Examples of each will be extracted from a corpus of British Nineteenth Century writings totalling 49 million words. The theory of Lexical Priming [Hoey 2005] will then be outlined and discussed in relation to metaphor, more specifically, as a means of exploring and accounting for the range of behaviours found in metaphoric language.

The second section of the paper will discuss the findings of two corpus studies focusing on the items *FLAME* and *GREW*. The idea is that the highly frequent use of both noun and verb will bring to light the complexity of metaphor. The studies will help to

demonstrate not only the variability in strength and type of metaphoricality, but the concordance lines will also highlight the importance of reoccurring patterns in the lexis (collocation, colligation, semantic and pragmatic association). The research proposes that these lexical patterns are an effective way in to the exploration of metaphor behaviour. The data will be quantitatively and qualitatively analysed using *Wordsmith5 Tools* [Scott 2005].

To reiterate, the intention then is to illustrate how real-world data and corpus techniques can benefit our stance towards metaphor identification, by exposing the fuzzy and multi-layered aspects of lexical metaphoricality. Based on the findings presented, it can be concluded that the functionality of the umbrella term ‘metaphor’ is often far too restrictive. Moreover the research serves to illustrate that the perspective on lexical metaphor should be re-focused on to the individual language user and their interaction with the language.

3. Research Background

Lexical metaphor concerns the semantic association of words within a given context. Wikberg defines it as “a way of seeing something in terms of something else, a process which involves a linguistic expression referring in an unconventional way to people, animals, things, events or concepts on the basis of some similarity, correlation, or analogy” [Wikberg 2006: 34]. Goatly’s definition of metaphor consolidates and develops upon Wikberg’s, extending it to grammatical structure also: an unconventional act of reference or colligation is understood on the basis of some similarity, matching or analogy involving the conventional referent or colligates of the unit and the actual unconventional referent or colligates [Goatly 1997: 86].

Thus any entity referred to metaphorically lacks at least one critical feature possessed by the conventional referents of the word. This divergence in relationship can be defined grammatically by colligation, or semantically by collocation, semantic association,

and pragmatic association. This divergence in convention can be labelled as an exploitation from a particular norm [Hanks 2004], or as a break in our expectations or primings [Hoey 2005]. Such a definition of metaphor is the basis for this investigation.

Hoey's theory of Lexical Priming [2005] presents a usage-based account for both the psychological motivation behind our understanding of language and our ability to use language fluently to communicate within a given context. The theory places importance on the lexical patterns that language forms within a context. These range from collocation and colligation to textual based patterns such as cohesion, to more abstract notions such as pragmatic association. According to the theory, these patterns, or primings [Hoey 2005], are part of what it means to know or understand the meaning of a word or phrase.

In terms of metaphor, the theory offers us a way of categorizing metaphoricity based upon the lexical features, or primings within groups of metaphors. The research on *GREW* shows that whilst all literal instances refer to the physical growth or development of something organic, the 2700 instances of metaphors vary considerably, not only in their semantic associations (e.g. growth of emotions/cities/noise), but also differ in their grammatical patterns and strength of collocation. These in turn affect the strength of the metaphoricity (i.e. how well it is known and used, and how opaque it is to a language user). By categorizing metaphors based upon the lexical behaviours identified in a corpus, we are able to found our research on a usage-based, real-world account of metaphors in context.

Further to the theory is the claim that primings are not permanent features of a word (or set of words). Each use we make of a word, and each new encounter, either reinforces the primings or loosens them. They may accordingly shift in the course of time and use, and subsequently the lexical item/s can shift slightly in meaning and/or function. This may be referred to as drifts in the priming [cf. Hoey 2005], and allows for the creative use or flexibility of

metaphors. In terms of semantic analysability of metaphor, evidence of collocation can be found at one end of the scale (*FLAME of love*) whilst the most opaque idiomatic metaphors (those which we do not need to derive the origin of in order to understand) lie at the other (e.g. *an old FLAME of mine*). However, whilst primings are evident within the metaphoric data of *FLAME* and *GREW*, it is important to acknowledge that the patterns are evidence of a general tendency amongst users. There are of course anomalies and single instances of language, which reflect the nature of individual language use. The theory claims then that metaphoricity cannot be accounted for unanimously or universally. This theory is presented in contrast to the idea that metaphoricity is inherent and provides an explanation for the more complex behaviours involved. It is also important to consider that metaphoric language is not always created and interpreted in the same way. Thus the recognition of the distinction between the metaphor creator's role (speaker/writer) and the interpreter's role (listener/reader) is paramount to the theory, as well as the level of interaction with the text, the user's own knowledge and use of language and indeed the contextual factors surrounding the exchange or interaction.

4. Methodology

The data has been taken from a corpus of 500 British Nineteenth Century writings totalling 49 million words. Hoey [2005] claims that the priming theory is genre specific, and thus the possibility of primings occurring within the data is more likely if the corpus reflects a particular genre or time period. The corpus is compiled of both fiction and non-fiction, including travel writings, short stories, novels, periodicals and reviews, and historical fiction.

For both studies the lexical items were chosen for their high frequency, metaphoric potential and also keyness, in the 19th Century corpus when compared to a more contemporary usage within the BNC. The items were scanned for possible metaphoric uses and

chosen based on their potential, within these lemma forms only. The aim was to use a noun and a verb to compare behaviours.

In total there are 1200 instances of *FLAME* and 3798 instances of *GREW*. These have been divided into clear metaphoric uses, clear literal uses, and a considerable sized middle group, compiled of anomalies, debateable instances, or those subject to different opinions by different readers. Each group has then been analysed for evidence of lexical patternings. The data will be compared in terms of the metaphoric instances and the literal instances, and between the *FLAME* and the *GREW* metaphors.

5. Results

The results of both studies show that there is evidence of lexical primings specific to certain groups of metaphors, whilst there are also primings specific to all literal uses. Whilst semantic associations are fairly predictable (literal uses of *FLAME* include references to nouns such as lamps/candles/torches in close proximity), there are grammatical tendencies also, such as the higher use of prepositions and articles used in the literal uses (*FLAME of the, over the FLAME, towards the FLAME*). In contrast there is a much higher use of personal pronouns in the metaphors, particularly in R3 position. This is accounted for by the one type of metaphoric construction: *an old FLAME of HIS*. Within the metaphoric data, there is also a higher use of abstract nouns within a particular colligation (*FLAME + of + abstract noun*), as well as differences in the choice of adjectives and verbs and a greater use of possessives. Analysis of concordance lines also reveals more implicit or abstract primings such as semantic prosody and the ability to evoke particular feelings and emotions through a projection of expected primings onto metaphors. This is shown with '*solitary FLAME*'. The results for *GREW* show similar specific tendencies or primings, but more firmly dependent on the context in which the metaphor is being used. Thus, the metonymic reference to a society growing is reflected by a different set of lexical patterns to the metaphoric ref-

erence to a person's strength growing, which is again different in the patterning surrounding the metaphor of a person's face growing red, or a noise growing louder. It could be claimed that *GREW* has a much wider range of uses in its metaphoric sense, or indeed senses.

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings presented, two main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it can be concluded that the functionality of the umbrella term 'metaphor' is often far too restrictive. Evidence is provided for this in the broad range of lexical characteristics involved in metaphoric behaviour. Secondly, the paper illustrates that metaphoricity is a dynamic process dependent on many factors, including outside of the text itself. Evidence of lexical primings demonstrates that through subsequent use, we have come to expect metaphors (as indeed all language) to be presented in particular patterns and constructions, within certain contexts and uses. This may be a conscious process or it may not be, but the important point is that the metaphoricity of a word or phrase comes about only through the role of the language users (producers and the receivers) and their primings, not simply on the language as a static phenomenon. Thus the research urges that concept of lexical metaphor can only be comprehensively discussed when its relationship with the language user is addressed.

The paper concludes that metaphoricity is a highly fluid psychologically dependent phenomenon, which has the ability to *come into* and *out of* view. In sum, the research serves to illustrate that the perspective on lexical metaphor should be re-focused on to the individual language user and both the social and psychological processes that dominate meaning and our ever-changing use of language.

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