Philosophical Investigations into Figurative Speech
Metaphor and Irony

Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone

We can understand a metaphor even when it's fresh and unfamiliar; even when there is no convention or pre-established meanings for any of its words or constructions. When we think of this creativity, we like to cite this metaphor from the comedian Matt Groening.

> Love is a snow mobile racing across the tundra; it flips over pinning you underneath. At night the ice weasels come.

A snow mobile is a sport vehicle like a car on skis that you drive through the snow. It's fun; it's exhilarating, and it gives a sense of adventure. A tundra is a frozen landscape with no trees, a place of relative safety. Weasels are small predatory animals known for their fierceness and trickery. When you put this all together you imagine a prototypical course for a love affair, where it starts with a sense of adventure and excitement and then goes horribly wrong leaving you with a gnawing feelings of torture and pain. What seems to be doing the work here is our ability to understand the sentence as described; and then to draw an analogy between the experience of being in love and a certain kind of history that could happen.

Bit if metaphors aren't conventional, how is it we can get a special meaning from them? After all, love isn't *really* a snow mobile. The tradition developed by the philosopher H.P. Grice provides one way to explain how metaphors work: for Grice and other theorists in his tradition (e.g., John Searle), a metaphor is an utterance with a speaker meaning that differs from its literal meaning in an idiosyncratic and particular way. The literal meaning might tell you something about snowmobiles but speaker meaning reveals something about the trajectory of love affairs. Grice has a theory in which speaker meaning can always differ from literal meaning because of the way that an audience retrieves speaker meaning is by reasoning about what the speaker must have in mind in using the utterance.

John Searle was the first theorist to flesh out a Gricean theory of metaphor in detail. His idea was that when you say, "Love is a snowmobile," you don't mean literally love is a snowmobile. You mean is love is a snowmobile*, where "snowmobile*" is a new concept, or a new property, that's related to being a snowmobile, that has something in common with real snowmobiles and what they are like to ride, or to work with. The speaker's communicative intention in making the utterance is not to talk about snowmobiles but to talk about snowmobiles*. And the audience recognizes this because there are principles of metaphorical interpretation that are part of their shared background, that give hints about how to replace one property with an associated one. An audience can work out that this kind of metaphorical interpretation is necessary, because only by using one of these associated properties

in the speaker meaning of the utterance can they recover a message that makes sense, that is appropriate for the conversation. In short, according to the Gricean account of metaphor, there's nothing special about metaphor; it's just recognition of communicative intentions through general psychological principles involved in all cases of communication.

In the literature on metaphor, however, few scholars have argued that metaphor is a general process of this kind: most argue that something about the interpretation of metaphor is special; so it's useful to review some of their insights about metaphor in order to take stock of this idea from Searle, that metaphors are pragmatic psychological (non-linguistic) inferences, based on speaker meaning. The three theorists whose work we will touch on in this connection are Max Black, Donald Davidson and Liz Camp.

In the literature on metaphor people have always wanted to explain why metaphor is special; it seems like there is something distinctive and poetic and untranslatable about a good metaphor. Because of this, going back hundreds of years, theorists have resisted attempts to give easy paraphrases of metaphors. The analysis of metaphor starts with Aristotle, who proposed that a metaphor was basically a disguised simile. He wrote:

> The simile is also a metaphor. The difference is but slight. When the poet says of Achilles that he
>
> Leapt on the foe as a lion
>
> this is a simile; when he says of him "the lion leapt," it is a metaphor. [Similes] are to be employed just a metaphors are employed, since they are really the same thing except for the difference mentioned (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1406b).

In other words, for Aristotle, when you say, "Love is a snowmobile," all you really mean is that love is *like* a snowmobile. You have a kind of paraphrase, a kind of speaker meaning, that's very simple and formulaically related to, the literal meaning of what you said.

Aristotle's view became a target for all those theorists who thought there was something special about metaphor, something poetic and untranslatable. Max Black was one of the theorists who put these objections into print most influentially. He argued that the simile theory can't be right for a couple of reasons; one is that the interpretation of a metaphor is much more specific than a mere comparison. If you say, "Richard is a lion," you don't just mean that Richard is like a lion in unspecified or indefinite ways. Usually, you want to convey that Richard is courageous and bold and forceful, a formidable opponent or attacker. That's specific set of commonalities with a lion doesn't come across with a simile analysis.

A more serious objection, for Black, is that metaphorical thinking gives special insights that can't be paraphrased. When you say, "Richard is a lion," you're not just

saying that he a courageous or a formidable opponent. You are also thinking of him *as a lion* and that imagery, the perspective you are taking on Richard, is as important to the effect and the point of a metaphor as any propositional information you convey. (It's that perspective taking is crucial to metaphorical interpretation that also counts as an objection to Grice, because there's no notion of perspective taking in his theory, because perspective taking is not one of the general cognitive operations you do in understanding a speaker.)

Black called his positive account of metaphor "the interaction theory of metaphor"; and explaining his view helps to understand what's at stake in the perspective taking that it part of metaphorical interpretation. Metaphor, for Black, starts with a tension and incompatibility between what we know about the source domain (lions, let's say) and what you know about the target domain (Richard, a person). In characterizing what one knows, Black emphasizes the ramifying texture and social relevance of the facts that you consider; he called these facts *systems of associated common places*. For example, it's salient about a lion that they are ferocious, formidable opponents and brave. This distinctive pattern of ideas is an important part of what you have to reconcile with Richard in order to make sense of the metaphor.

Black proposed that this tension is resolved by a basic cognitive operation; and this operation constitutes the distinctive perspective taking metaphors allow. You take those aspects of the source that fit the target – a set of properties, let's say, that conventionally are associated with the source domain, and then filter you're thinking about the target by emphasizing these aspects, which may be things you know about the target or not, but that prompt you to reassess and reinterpret what you know about the target in a way that highlights consequences of these important features of the source domain.

Liz Camp pursues this characterization of the cognitive operation of metaphorical thinking in more detail; she particularly wants to contrast it with general notions of comparison and general notions of exploring the important details in imagery; *seeing one thing as another* is different from just *comparing two things*. Seeing one thing as another is different from realizing that particular features of something are important or distinctive or affectively laden. You're not going to understand metaphorical thinking, Camp argues, unless you can be precise about this operation of seeing one thing as another.

One way of bringing this out is to contrast metaphors with *telling details*. Telling details are facts or information you provide in setting the scene; or informing your audience that you intend for them to think further about, that can develop open ending understanding, where lots of information, lots of consequences are easily imagined through elaborating these telling details. What's more, it can be important to your appreciation of the information that you explore the consequences of those telling details, because those telling details might tell you important emotional

information about a scene: how you're meant to react to it; who you are supposed to empathize with, and what should of feelings should be prompted.

Camp emphasizes that you naturally expect that you can color your interpretation of a text by presenting details that prompt relevant inferences. The Chinese poet Li Po is someone who used telling details influentially in poetry; one line of poem that Ezra Pound considered is:

> I watch the moon through the clear autumn

In the context of the poem, this line is uttered by a woman whose lover has failed to meet her at an appointed assignation. The moonlight conveys the stillness and loneliness of knowing you've been rejected, while the clear autumn night underscores the kind of arbitrariness of her lover's failing to come to meet her.

Lots of information in a text colors your appreciation, but metaphor goes beyond this; in perspective taking, in seeing one thing as another, you have to reconstruct a correspondence between Richard and a lion, a correspondence that allows you to reinterpret Richard's properties as lion like, that his bold response to questions when he gives talk is similar to the aggressive pounce of a lion in prey. This distinct aspect of metaphorical thinking comes from this perspective taking, which is not something that automatically follows from any independent principles of pragmatic reasoning.

Given that metaphor is special and given that metaphor requires a distinctive kind of thinking, you might wonder why it is that that theorists have worked so hard to assimilate metaphor to theories of speaker meaning – whether semantic or pragmatic (i.e., linguistic or psychological). This is exactly what Donald Davidson has argued. He argues that there is no distinctive speaker meaning in metaphor. What's distinctive about metaphor is that you recognize this correspondence, that you take up a particular perspective on the topic and target of the metaphor, and that you think through that perspective to whatever insights you get. That's all there is, for Davidson. There's nothing more you need to say about a level of speaker meaning, or some kind of proposition that the speaker is encoding in a metaphorical utterance. In short, he argues that there is no pragmatic dimension to metaphor at all of the sort Searle argued for.

The key question for Davidson, which he pursues in a variety of ways in his article is why is it that we can use metaphors in all the ways that we do use metaphors for if there's no proposition encoded in a metaphorical statement? The best way to see this is to go through some of the more challenging reasons for why theorists think there is metaphorical meaning; and show how you can do without it.

One reason theorists insist on metaphorical meaning is because of the presumed scope relationship between metaphors in a sentence. In John Donne's poem, he writes:

No man is an island.

We know no man is an island: people are people; islands are geography. What's going on? What it seems is that John Donne is denying men have a certain metaphorical property, the property of being an island*, of being so cut off from one's fellows in society that one can live completely independently without connections to other people. The negation, it seems, then, takes scope over that metaphorical meaning. Donne is saying it is not the case that anyone is an island*. If we are going to do without metaphorical meaning, we have to give an analysis of this metaphor, which doesn't have negation taking scope over the metaphor. There can't be scope, if there is no meaning.

Here's roughly how that can be done. You think that the metaphor is separate from the linguistic encoding; and you think that the metaphor is more general than just mapping islands to independents. Rather, you think the metaphor maps people to places in general. And in general you think the metaphor maps social connections to geographical connections. Now imagine a world where people are laid out as places connected to one another as they are connected in real life; and ask yourself, Who is an island here? You can see no one is, in this sense: you can see the whole statement as being a metaphor, and you don't have to think of the negation as taking scope over the metaphor in any way. This is the kind of story you have to tell if you believe there is no metaphorical meaning.

There's some evidence, we think, that this is the right view, because most metaphors are not confined to single words, or isolated sentences in texts. In Donne's poem, the metaphor actually extends over two or three clauses, as you see in this larger excerpt of the poem:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

(These famous words by John Donne were not originally written as a poem - the passage is taken from the 1624 Meditation 17, from Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and is prose.)

Here you see that actually there is one metaphor across the entire discourse of people as places, and social connections as geographical connections; and it makes sense to interpret the lines of the poem that invoke this metaphor, as all describing this one figurative possibility.

Another case where you might want to invoke metaphorical meaning is in indirect reports. You might want to think that you appeal to the metaphorical meaning in the

scope of other interpretive elements in order to explain the overall meaning of the sentence as a function of the meaning of its parts.

1) Chris thinks that no man is an island.

You're not trying to say nobody is a geographical entity; what you are trying to say is that Chris acknowledges the universality of social connections. How is it that you can have this kind of meaning for the whole sentence without having a metaphorical meaning of the constituent?

The solution is to give the right meaning for the verb "to think". Meaning has to be sensitive to the possibility of metaphorical thought. If S is a sentence that naturally has a metaphorical interpretation, it means something special to say you think that sentence. It means you think of that sentence as an apt metaphor, and you endorse in your thinking the insights that follow or issue from, or are provoked by, that metaphorical interpretation of the sentence. This works for (1).

(1) means, applying the rule that Chris thinks it's apt to imagine people as places and social connections as geographical connections; and Chris accepts the insight that everyone is connected that follows from that metaphorical consideration of "No man is an island". If this is right, we can explain the interpretation of (1) without having a metaphorical meaning for "No man is an island."

In short, compositional semantics is *not* a reason for positing metaphorical meaning. The Davidsonian program allows alternative explanations for those constructions that prima facie at least encourage us to think otherwise. But what about those discourse uses of metaphor, the role that metaphor plays in our thinking, in our social relationships, in our interactions with one another?

You may know that Donne's poem is actually an argument: he wants to convince that we are all lessened by deaths in our community. The argument goes something like this:

1. Nobody is an island.
2. You in particular are not an island
3. Therefore, you have lost something in the announcement of the funeral that you hear in the church bells.

How is it that you can make an argument with a metaphor, if the speaker is not contributing a proposition that she means when she contributes the metaphor? If you are going to explain this, you need to be sensitive to our ability to show and demonstrate and refer to the world in our explanations. When you present a metaphor, you expect the audience to be drawn to certain conclusions from the metaphorical thinking that they do. You needn't, therefore, package those conclusions up into a meaning. There are lots of other cases where you expect your

interlocutor to draw conclusions, but those conclusions are not packaged up into a meaning.

A naturally occurring and compelling example of this phenomenon is from the internet: Imagine two people in a small airplane and the pilot is explaining to the co-pilot why they bring up the landing gear as soon as they take off. He says:

I'm going to drop the landing gear. Watch what happens
(He pushes the button; the landing gear goes down and the plane slows and starts to fall, because of the added drag that the dropped landing gear creates)
(The pilot pushes the button again the raise the landing gear back to normal and says)
That's why we keep the landing gear up.

In this case, the pilot expects his audience to draw specific conclusions from their observations of what is happening. The plane is slowing down; there's obvious turbulence, and drag on the plane, that is impairing its ability to fly. The fact that the speaker does something that makes this information obvious is clear. But it's just as clear that the speaker is not packaging up that obvious information into a meaning. That information is in the world.

A Davidsonian argues the same is true of metaphor. When Donne says "No man is an island; the belle tolls for thee," he's counting on you to draw certain conclusions from your engagement with the world as he just described it, but he's leaving those conclusions for you to draw; he's not packaging them up into a meaning.

We can even give instructions in metaphor. Coaches in athletic events often tell students to do by giving a metaphor. If you want to swim the butterfly, it's very difficult. Your hips sink in the water; and at the same time it's still hard to get your arms out of the water and keep your mouth high enough to breathe. You have to relax and flow through it. And one way a coach can get swimmers to swim the butterfly the right way is to tell them "Do this – with each stroke let a wave flow along the length of your body, from your head down your back and through your legs".

This wave is just an imaginary thing, it's a metaphor for the orchestration of movements that you have when you swim this stroke successfully. How is it that a coach can tell you do something with a metaphor if that metaphor doesn't have a meaning of what it is you are supposed to do? Again, we can take the language at face value and give just as good an explanation of compliance with a metaphorical instruction, as we could if we invoked some mysterious extra meaning. Suppose that you say the instruction just asks the swimmer to move and to use the image of a wave to guide the orchestration of her movement, that is, to think about what's literally instructed of her as she tries to meet that instruction. Is there anything more we have to say – "No!" – because this is what you do when you follow this

instruction. And this is what lets you swim the butterfly by following this instruction.

In short, the Davidsonian approach to metaphor has a lot to recommend it; here's what it boils down to. Rather than saying there is a speaker meaning that derives an interpretation for a metaphor in the ordinary way, we say something radically different. We say the metaphor has its own cognitive mechanism, a distinctive cognitive mechanism that you apply to metaphor and only for metaphor, where you use your knowledge of one domain to put a perspective on something else.

This is a distinctive open-ended inference that's not grounded in general principles of psychology, but rather in the particular power of a kind of imagination that's part of our psychology but a very particular part of it. The information we get through a metaphor that comes from this process is not pragmatic, in the sense of not part of speaker meaning, not signaled by the speaker or recognized by the hearer. It becomes an extension of the external world around us, a place where our perceptions and demonstrations can inform the thinking and interaction we do with one another, but not part of our communication, that is, not part of the communicative enterprise.

The next figure of speech we want to investigate is irony. Let's agree again, for the purposes of the dialectic here, that irony is creative; that is to say, that there are no particular conventions about the ironical uses of words, that rather that irony is a way of appreciating imagery that one understands through the general competence that we have to understand descriptions of situations

One of the most influential examples of irony in English is the political pamphlet, *A Modest Proposal*, written by Jonathan Swift in the early 1700's. In it, the anonymous pamphleteer purports to argue that the best way to alleviate poverty is Ireland is to farm and eat Irish children. It's not a serious suggestion; in fact, the essay is written with a devastating energy and bitterness that was Swift's response to the depth of Irish poverty at the time, and the cruelty that characterized contemporary political debates.

Here's a passage from this that starts to illustrate how deep the irony runs, but also what the mechanisms are that engage you so strongly when you read this essay:

> I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the common-wealth, would deserve so well of the publick, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation. (Swift, 1720, *A Modest Proposal*)

What's going on here is that the speaker that we understand to have written this pamphlet is actually a fictional character; it's not Swift at all. Rather, it's a boring, pedantic, cruel, upper class, political hack. To understand the discourse, you need to reconstruct the background and interests of this fictional character to know what the perspective is from which these words are coming. And then you can understand the discourse at another level by engaging with, and responding to, this fictional character and effectively contesting this character's view of the world. In this sense, in appealing to the difference between a fictional speaker and the actual speaker we are influenced by the theory of *layering* that Herb Clark argues is a pervasive feature of everyday language use.

What's going on here is that there are some appalling choices in the above passage from Swift: How is this rampant poverty not the deplorable state of the kingdom itself? How is this rampant poverty merely an additional grievance? When we consider ways of helping the poor, why should we only consider the cheap and easy ones? When we consider all of the good outcomes for alleviating poverty, why should having a statue set up be so important? In other words, this speaker takes for granted the weakness of government, our own indifference of the plight of the poor, and the kind of vanity of public recognition as the main drive for our activities. The speaker sees the world very differently from how we do, and it's horrible.

If you try to calculate the meaning an ironic discourse, you might be tempted to start from Grice's suggestion about sarcasm. Grice suggested that when you say, "It's a fine day today," in the middle a sleeting, gray winter, you mean the opposite of what you say. But Swift doesn't mean the opposite of what he says in this passage. In fact, everything in this passage, in its own disturbing way, pretty much true. It's true that the poverty is a serious problem; it's true that it would be great to have a method for alleviating it, even a cheap and easy one. It's true that whoever found one would be rewarded. There is no sort of transformation, if you like, on the content of the imagery, on the content of this passage, that's going to give you the speaker meaning; in fact, there doesn't seem to be any correspondence between the point of the passage and what's literally said. Really, you have to engage with the text, see the assumptions that the speaker is making, see what kind of person that makes the speaker, and react to that. There is no shortcut. The process is essential, and the process is distinctive.

Reconstructing the suppositions of a fictional person who might have written something is not the same thing as reconstructing the suppositions of the actual person, who actually did write the passage. There's no way in which you can bring to bear your actual knowledge of Swift to understand why the grievance is additional, for example. There's a kind of isolation, a kind of generic reasoning that you are using here, which is just not the reasoning that Grice was talking about.

We have the same kind of situation as with Metaphor; this is not general reasoning – the same thing you apply all the time, whenever you interpret a signal form the world, whenever you recognize a cooperative contribution to the conversation.

Rather, what we have is a distinctive way of engaging with an utterance, reconstructing an imagined speaker that's part of our cultural repertoire for using language, a distinctive practice that needs to be described in its own terms.

Metaphor and irony are rich and important phenomena that theorists study from a wide range of perspectives. With all the deep and particular understanding that theorists have of irony and metaphor it's easy for our point to get lost. Our point is simple: The pragmatic inferences that Grice considered and gave a uniform explanation for actually, we claim, come from distinctive practices for engaging with imagery. There is no general mechanism behind these practices. Metaphor works the way it works, and irony works the way it works.

The way to bring this out using familiar linguistic methodology is to offer a minimal pair. Here's some background. The building where one of us lives is one of the tallest buildings in its neighborhood. It's at an intersection where two grids meet, so you can see it from far away and that's useful because streets that cross that intersection all turn about 45 degrees, and so, it helps to triangulate where you are, to be able to see that building from far away. It's also true that this building it not beautiful or majestic, even though it's large. It's very plain; and it has a white brick façade. It turns out that in NYC in the 1960's almost all of the buildings that went up were these big white boxes put up in residential neighborhoods. The neighborhood is predominantly one of townhouses and tenements that are mostly five stories tall. So a 20-story building looks very much out of place there. So, when this building went up in the 1960's that galvanized the History Preservation Society in the neighborhood. So no more buildings like this one are going to be built, because of zoning restrictions that have been introduced to maintain the character of the neighborhood as it was. This is all background.

With this background, we'd like you to consider three different utterances of (2), with three different interpretations.

(2) That building is a landmark.

This is literally true; you can use a landmark as point that you can see from far away; that you can use to navigate. And the building is a landmark in that sense. But ironically you can also use (2); it's an eyesore; it's big and ugly; you wouldn't have to see if, but you can see it everywhere anyway. There is also a metaphorical sense in which you can use (2). It has a distinctive place, not in the geography of Greenwich Village, but in the history of Greenwich Village. It marked the turning point in neighborhood preservation.

So we have three ways of understanding utterances of (2); literal, ironic and metaphorical. You can use any of those utterances to describe the building, but when you recognize what the speaker is trying to get across, what the speaker is trying to do, different inferences follow if you think of it as being literal, or you think of it as being ironic, or you think of it as being metaphorical.

What this suggests to us is that there really are qualitative differences among the ways you can think about, or interpret, a sentence. There's a literal interpretation that involves one set of principles; that there's ironic interpretation that involves different principles; and that there's metaphorical interpretation that involves different principles. And when you draw different inferences from (2), what's signaling the differences between those inferences is not just speaker intentions, not just cooperation. What makes it different is that a metaphor is an instruction to think one way, irony is an instruction to think another way, and literal meaning as an instruction to think but a third way; and the differences come from the character of the interpretive process, not just recognizing the speaker's intention, or knowing that they are cooperative, or knowing that you are trying to extract the most information possible from what they have said. They're really different ways of using utterances and we need to describe them separately.

In summary: Grice's work suggests a uniform treatment of figurative speech, where pragmatic reasons depends solely on one principle; and pragmatic reasoning delivers propositions that are asserted just like literal meanings, so there's nothing special about metaphor and irony, for example, in terms of how they fit into the conversation. The problem, as we have seen, is that there is no such uniform possibility for interpretation. Interpretive inference and the way we in engage with what's said are highly variable. An interpretation of metaphor or irony just becomes available to the hearer, who reconstructs it by open-ended and indeterminate processes of metaphorical thinking or appreciation of irony and so forth. The way we prefer to talk about this is following Donald Davidson, who speaks of the *point* of utterances. A point is not proposition; it's more abstract than that. It can include feeling a certain way; or thinking a certain way, or just any kind of cognitive change.

Often the point is, in effect, something the hearer needs to discover for himself or create for himself. That effort involves diverse kinds of engagement with the utterance, each suited for the particular trope or mechanism that the speaker appeals to in his utterance. Here, then, we get an empirical challenge that in two different ways will keep the field busy, if we are right, for a long time.

We need many theories of inference, not just the one theory. The only way to discover those theories is to find what the natural classes are of figurative language in terms of how they prompt certain kinds of thinking. Then we need to discover the inferential principles that fit each case. But this is only half of the problem, because even after we know what the point is of a metaphor, or the point of ironic utterances, we need to describe in a much more robust way than anyone has done thus far, how these cognitive effects feed back to the conversation. How is it that information that we get from non-linguistic sources effects the interpretation of subsequent utterances, or the dynamics of inquiry that interlocutors are pursuing together?

Metaphor is one case of this, but it's a much bigger problem We need to know how when you demonstrate something, say, by putting down the landing gear, how that shapes interpretation and inquiry; or when you show someone a picture, or draw a diagram, how that information adds to, and shapes, the course of the conversation. Rather than kind of abstract processes of models of inquiry that are based purely on sending messages, we are going to need to be able to think precisely about situated dialogues, situated interactions, where we are explicit about the many paths through which information flows in the conversation, acknowledging how that shapes how language works. We don't know how to do this as of now.

Where are we going to be? How will this affect the work we do? We have structured this discussion primarily addressed to philosophers, and what we would like to inspire philosophers to do is to take the linguistics more seriously, and use the linguistics to come up with better arguments that people have made previously, acknowledging the fact that the problems we have considered so far will make those difficult arguments to construct. But we think that they will be rewarding and that they will lead to useful and more lasting insights than we have so far.