

4. METAPHOR AND OTHER TROPES (2/17)

Susan Sontag sometimes insists that we only think about things literally, without using metaphor, but it is not clear we can do that, because figurative language is so pervasive in all human languages

We need to make some basic distinctions, starting with the word **Trope**. Metaphor is one of several kinds of trope.

A trope is a figure of speech (though we will also see that can exist outside of language) in which one thing is linked symbolically with something else.

It is sometimes seen as a replacement or substitution, as putting one thing in the place of another: You're a chicken/ a turkey/ acting like a pig/ howling like a wolf.

He's a good egg/ a brick/ an angel/ pond scum.

The British comedian Terry Thomas used to say "Hard Cheese, old chap" meaning tough luck. A boat named the "Flying Cloud"; a town named "New York" or Turner's Falls--- all are tropes.

It is sometimes said that a trope is calling a thing something it isn't: I can see that you're not really a dirty dog or an old goat.

Sometimes this point has been taken even further, to suggest that all tropes are lies.

Sontag sometimes seems to pick up some of this attitude.

But we will see that this is a slippery distinction, because often tropes are not "just a figure of speech": to say that Jesus is a shepherd or God is a father is not merely metaphorical to a devout Christian.

Moreover, the essential nature of many things is often unclear or inchoate. We sometimes define what something is by tropes.

No reason to see tropes as anything but good, also as inevitable. No way anyone can get by with just literal speech.

Metaphor. When people say "metaphor," they often mean tropes in general, but it's best to save this word for one variety of trope.

Namely one that links two separate things that are in some sense alike or equivalent or parallel or correspond with each other.

Hair of the dog that bit you/ Nixon as a used car salesman/ Elvis as teddy bear (not lion or tiger). Any trope where two separate things are likened to each other, where they share attributes.

Notice that metaphor is often distinguished from simile, in that similes make overt comparisons, often using the word "like". Also distinguished from analogy, a term that tends to be used for more formal, abstract comparisons, or for complex metaphors.

We will ignore these distinctions. For us, all are varieties of metaphor: they have same structure and intent, whether one says he *is* a lion or is *like* a lion. The term allegory is used for especially self-conscious or elaborate or moralizing metaphors.

Metonymy. Another trope, which links two things that are somehow connected, physically or factually, or contiguous, but not necessarily alike.

One formal definition, from David Sapir (see supplementary readings), says metonym, “Rather than the relationship of two terms from separate domains that share overlapping features, it is the relationship of two terms that occupy a common domain but do not share common features” (1977:20).

Thus umbrellas can be metonyms for many things with which they are associated: rain (as in symbol in newspaper weather forecast table), Winnie the Pooh, British civil servants, appeasement of dictators (because of Neville Chamberlain in 1938).

Q. What are things for which cigars are used as metonyms?: for tough guys, men on their own, bad smells, politicians, childbirth, Fidel Castro, Winston Churchill, tongue cancer, etc. etc.

Anything that is associated with something or someone can be a metonym for it: Cowboys and guns, saddles, cows, prairies, chuck wagons, drinking, singing, fist fights, Dodge City, the streets of Laredo, body odor, etc.etc.
Geographical names are often metonymic: Cedar Rapids, Blue Hill, Turner’s Falls, Indian Lake.

Q. What about cars? What are the metonymical and metaphorical connections of cars as wholes, and parts of cars? Back seat or rumble seat with sex. The trunk with mob killings. Hubcaps and radios with theft. Ad infinitum. Often elaborated, as in Springsteen’s “Pink Cadillac.”

In all of these examples, metonym is constructed on the basis of *physical* contiguity or connection. Physically in same domain or joined. But, according to traditional definitions, which come down from Aristotle, it can also be *logical* contiguity or connection:

Cause for effect: “It’s the liquor talking” (about a belligerent drunk).

Effect for cause: “We laid a patch” (meaning we accelerated sharply).

Container for contained: “The Vatican issued a statement today.”

Instrument for agent: “You have gotten yourself a machete” (what is said to a new bride about her husband as worker among the Kuna).

Act for agent.

If we return to Sontag, we can see that when she says metaphor, she often means tropes in general and only sometimes metaphor in particular.

If TB is said to gallop, it is a metaphor *about* TB drawn from the domain of horses.

If the white race is called the cancer of the world, it is metaphor drawn *from* the domain of disease about a human population.

If TB is said to have been associated with travel, exotic places, or exile, these are all metonyms.

Seeing cancer as an invasion is metaphorical; claiming that it follows from sexual repression is metonymic, cause and effect.

Synecdoche. There is one more kind of trope to be noted. Synecdoche is a trope in which the relationship between the two things is one of part to whole. The most commonly cited example is use of sail to mean a whole ship.

Very frequent with hands: cowhands, deck hands, old hands, all hands on deck.

Kuna also say to bride, "You have gotten yourself a hand."

Like other two tropes, synecdoches are ubiquitous. Any kind of symbolic relationship where smaller represents larger or vice-versa. Macrocosm and microcosm: cities on same plan as universe, house within city on same plan.

Alternative therapy called reflexology: whole body is mapped out onto foot.

Journalists are addicted to synecdoche: they examine one family or school or army unit or hydroelectric project and then treat it as typical of all such things.

Famous documentary TV show from years ago about family named Loud: treated as if stood for all American families.

Same in literature, drama, where situation is seen as in some way typical of all Americans or all humans or all whatever: Death of a Salesman, Archie Bunker, Everyman, Hamlet.

Some theorists treat synecdoche as just one kind of metonym. I think it is useful to distinguish them. (More on this later.)

Sapir (1977:13-19) distinguishes two varieties of synecdoche, *taxonomic* and *anatomical*.

Anatomical wherever it is a physical part/whole relationship: Just direct your feet to sunny side of the street. (No implication that you should leave the rest of your body behind.

Almost any part of the human body: He is a brain/ an asshole/ a legman.

Caricatures depend on a kind of physical synecdoche. Nixon's stubble or Barbara Streisand nose or Jimmy Durante's nose stands for whole person.

Taxonomic where it is one *kind* of thing: where Columbine stands for all school violence or all schools. Where King Lear stands for all foolish or anguished old men.

So we have three basic kinds of trope.

It is important to remember that all three consist not of single things by themselves, but of relationships between two or more things.

Also, we will see that particular tropes may involve more than one kind of connection to something else. Something can be both contiguous and alike, thus both a metaphor and a metonym. If we say dogs are like owners, a point often made humorously, dogs are thus both connected with owners and resemble them.

Many discussions of tropes have gotten completely tangled up or off on a wrong track because of the assumption that a figure can only be one thing or another.

All three terms come from Greek rhetoric, which actually has many more figures. But these three enough for us. Fourth often recognized is irony.

I prefer to see irony as a way of framing tropes or descriptions or claims or whatever is seen as ironic. Involves negation---I don't really mean it---or some other twist on the statement or claim.

The sources of metaphor.

As soon as start paying attention to the three tropes, see that ubiquitous, pervasive. Can't get away from them.

One approach is to look at the sources of metaphor, the subject areas drawn on to make metaphors about other things.

We will see later on some of the symbolic uses of foods, cooking, eating, etc.

Consider how (supposedly) characteristic foods are used to label national and ethnic groups: Limeys, Frogs, Beaners, Greasers, Krauts, etc.

Any field, any domain of concern gets drawn on to make metaphors: weather, time of day, etc.

In some cases such metaphors hold on even after the field has changed: we still have hundreds of metaphors from the age of sailing ships, for some of which we have forgotten the logic.

About people: derelict, hulk, loose cannon, old hand, mate, etc.

Actions: launch program, fend off, jump ship, scuttle, salvage, to ship something, etc.

And especially concerning politics and government: ship of state, who's at the helm? drifting, figurehead, change course, etc.

Dangers, problems: uncharted waters, sail close to wind, on lee shore, devil to pay, any port in storm, etc. etc. etc.

Logic often unclear today: Back and fill (now often taken as parking metaphor) about state of ship when drifting under control, sail alternately backing and filling. Loose cannon trope is vivid if see effect of uncontrolled cannon on wheels rolling around deck. "Devil" was last, outermost, seam between boards of deck, "paying" was caulking, hardest with that seam. Full version of saying was: "The devil to pay and no pitch hot." "Taken aback": probably not even aware that it is a nautical metaphor. Describes what happens when wind veers 180 degrees on square-rigged ship; suddenly driven straight backwards. Strong metaphor for being surprised or shocked by something.

Learning basic metaphors essential to participating in culture.

Clock as a resource for metaphor.

Sometimes new source of metaphors can transform thinking. Happened with invention of watches and clocks, most complex and impressive machine, people seized on them to talk about other things.

Descartes used to differentiate animals from humans: animals are like clock, essentially mechanical, no soul like humans.

Parts of natural world compared to parts of clock to argue for existence of God: if look at clock spring, can infer a clockmaker and a design for the whole; same true if look at an eye or a whale. Argument from design.

Could also be used to suggest purpose in universe, one we can't understand, like purpose in watch.

But some used in other ways: notion that world like clock, in that God sets it going in beginning and then leaves it to run on own. Clock-maker god, not intervening

capriciously in people's lives as things come up. Some loved idea, made world seem orderly; some hated it, made world too impersonal. Some romantics rebelled against "soulless" mechanistic ideas, attacked clock analogy.

Tropes as structure.

Study of tropes has revealed how crucially important they are in all sorts of areas: they provide structure or a model of how to think about something. True in science, religion, history, and just about everywhere else.

Dream Interpretation.

We have an article by Gregor on Mehinacu dream interpretation.

Some of their interpretations are outside our experience, but they all make perfect sense once they are explained.

Q. What does dream about an anaconda mean? Q. What do you need to know about Mehinacu life to understand? Q. What about heaps of tapir dung? or wasp stings? or flying ants?

The Kuna, who live far way to North and West in Central America, differ in the specifics of their dreams and interpretations, but the interpretive principles are exactly the same.

You are standing on another island, your pants are ripped: means they are talking about you at home.

You catch many fish: you will win the national lottery.

You see an American: you will hunt a white-lipped peccary (which goes in groups and trumpets like U.S. soldiers in the Canal Zone). You see a Panamanian: you will hunt a collared peccary (which goes singly or in small groups and is less noisy).

Very striking that Freudian dream interpretation uses same mechanisms.

His theory is very different. Concerned with unconscious mind, wishes/ideas/emotions which too dangerous or frightening or turbulent to express or think about consciously, so dream them in hidden form.

Analyst is trying to find out, not what the future will bring, but what locked inside unconscious mind.

Freud used different terms. But basically just treated the dream symbols as hidden, difficult metaphors and metonyms. Analyst's job to unlock those tropes.

Divination. Dream interpretation is just one variety of divination, meaning any technique to peer into the future or hidden realms of the present. Will I die soon? Does she love me? Who is bewitching me? What hidden forces killed my brother?

Basic structure is more often than not based on trope: what happens in whatever thing or whatever area of life used for divination parallels what will happen: put a shoulder bone, a scapula, in fire, the cracks on the bone are read as image of where will go on the land to find animals to hunt.

Often, the divination is based on a really obvious metaphor.

When a couple marries among Kuna, send someone to nearby coral reef, find pair of crabs in a hole: how the crabs act together predicts whether marriage will be happy or conflict-filled.

Astrology, both western and Chinese, based on part on set of animals and reading of those animals as metaphors about individuals born under those signs: Scorpios are dangerous or sexual, Tauruses obstinate, Geminis two-faced or ambivalent.

Magic. Divination is one among many kinds of magic. Long ago, anthropologist James Frazer said were two kinds of magic, sympathetic and contagious, basically metaphor and metonym.

Sympathetic magic, metaphorical, works through similarity: stick pins in a hex dolly, stands for victim

Contagious magic, metonymic, works through contact: stab footprint, or work on something the victim has touched or used. Or hide something magical near victim.

Also synecdoche, something from victim: hair, nail clippings.

Often all three at once: hex dolly with toenail clippings inside it hidden under bed.

Everywhere in world systems of magic depend on the three tropes.

1. In one African society: when want abundance of something, use bark from a tree with many small fruits; when want a lover, use a tree whose blossoms attract bees; when want a baby to be born, use a tree whose fruits draw animals out of the forest.
2. In a society near New Guinea, when one wants a storage house to be secure, to stay undamaged by storms: use wood from a tree with tenacious roots, another tree so hard it breaks axes, and wood from the wild ginger, which fiercely repels animals.
3. Among Kuna, if the patient has scaly shedding skin, it is caused by a snake spirit; to cure a cold, use bark from tree with white sap. Carved figures representing helpful spirits, each spirit has character of wood: thorny, with tough fruits, etc. Leader is of balsa wood, smartest, because soft head is one that lets learning in.

Magical spells, from Guianas in Northern South America.

Spell to cure eye infection:

“Sun-child eyes are blocked up with clouds/fire/smoke that meets you
short-dry-season sun-child tries very hard meets screecher parrot”

Q. What is the metaphor? Comparing cloudiness of eye with infection to sun blocked by smoke. Need to know that in dry season, with slash-and-burn agriculture, huge clouds of smoke as burn off forest. Screecher parrot flying through and dispersing smoke is like desired cure of infection.

Another from same group, to cure whooping cough, called “howler monkey sickness”
Charm describes a tree, with monkeys and sloths and other animals holding onto it with claws. Invokes a chicken hawk and eagle to come catch the animals. Q. What is comparison? Throat like tree trunk. Claws of animals like pain in throat. Also howler monkeys make huge noise, very deep, like deep bronchial cough.

Striking how much in all these examples the logic stays the same, despite differences in the specifics.

Taboo. Negative magic or taboo, avoidance of things that symbolically bad, taboo. Kuna have many for pregnant women. Can eat little fish, not big—why? (Want small child, easy to give birth.) Must eat crackers not bread---why? (Bread expands, rises, fetus would be too big, no easily born.) Why don't eat cold rice? (Too sticky, want birth canal slippery, baby to emerge easily.) Why avoid jaguar pelts? (Don't want baby with spotted skin condition.)

Other side of world, birth taboos have exact same logic: No reef fish, because live in little caves in coral, hard to pry out. No rotten fruit, because rotting is like dead baby.

Riddles, proverbs. Also depend on tropes:

Examples from Kuna: Q. What animal is "Meat in a can"? (tortoise)

Q. What is "noisy silver"? (a river)

Q. What bird is "Head falls first"? (Riddling name of toucan, whose bill is so heavy that drops head first if shot---metonym or synecdoche)

Proverbs are based on tropes: Don't ask the fox to guard the chickens, etc. etc.

Humor

Huge subject, but can see that at least sometimes based on tropes. When, as in *The Far Side* and in many other comic strips, animals do human things, is playing with metaphor. Often what makes a joke funny is a displacement or movement from one domain to another.

Hilarious column by Maureen Dowd on Chinese snakefish, big scare in 2002, having great fun comparing in backwards way with businessmen, Monica Lewinsky, etc. (NYT 7/07/2002). ***HYPERLINK HERE*** *****

Even heading, "coming on little fin feet" is play on famous trope of fog coming in on little cat feet, joke is that fish really does walk, literally.

Euphemism. Figures of speech that tone down or hide rough talk, unfortunate or filthy things. Also depends on tropes.

Some obviously based on metaphors. Kuna refer to urination as bailing your canoe, defecation as sending a telegram.

Q. Can you think of examples? Any of you who are native speakers of languages other than English?

Often such figures don't seem so euphemistic, not hiding or playing down or minimizing something, but joking about it. Kicked the bucket, bought the farm.

Some metonymic. What examples come to mind? "Go to bathroom" is what do on way to urinate. "Bathroom" itself is metonymic, since we are most often concerned in such rooms with elimination, not bathing. Sleep with someone.

Kuna say "Look North" for urination and defecation, because outer, northern side of islands, is where go to do it.

Many are based on a funny kind of synecdoche. Taxonomic. Takes advantage of fact that one concrete thing can be part of many general classes of things. Choose general class that sounds mild. To say that handicapped person is “physically challenged” is certainly true---being blind is a challenge, as are many rough things like being attacked by a bull---but challenges also include many much milder problems, so the figure euphemizes the condition. Same with civilian dead called casualties or collateral damage or even adversely affected, or lying as mis-speaking.

One problem with euphemisms is that when become standard, lose some of euphemistic power: “retarded” now not felt as euphemistic enough, so have “developmentally challenged.”

Some euphemisms are not based on tropes, but on similarities in sound, though same kind of displacement as in tropes : Some English-speakers say sugar instead of shit, also cripes, Gee, Jeas Louise, Heck, etc. Latin Americans say chuleta (pork chop) or Chihuahua instead of chinga. British Cockneys had whole form of semi-secret speech based on substituting silly rhymes.