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Metonymy in the semantic field of verbal communication: A corpus-based analysis of WORD

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Abstract

Language about language has been studied above all from the perspective of metaphor, neglecting metonymy. This study tests the hypothesis that metonymy is also central within the semantic field of communication. A bottom-up, empirical study of *WORD*—one of the most frequent nouns in English—was carried out, based on 4000 tokens from the British National Corpus. *WORD* was found to be highly figurative, with metonymic uses (55%) being considerably more frequent than metaphorical uses (24%), but with some overlap, and with the two forms of the lemma displaying different profiles. Although largely an abstract noun, *WORD* is even richer in figurative meaning than previously studied body part nouns. The core meaning of *WORD* refers to the grammatical word, but it is frequently extended through metonymy—and especially synecdoche—to stand for units of communication of varying scope; these are mapped out in the study. The metonymic meanings were found to be more conventionalized in nature than the basic meanings. Metonymy is shown to be a robust phenomenon that, at least in the semantic field of verbal communication, may be more significant than the vastly more-studied phenomenon of metaphor.

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1. Introduction

“In the beginning was the word, and then came metonymy and metaphor”.

Dirven (2009:38)

Far from being the sole domain of dictionary makers, linguists, translators and other language professionals, talk about language and communication itself is common among language users in general. One source of evidence for this commonality is found in a large corpus representing a wide range of communicative events in present-day English (the British National Corpus): it shows that *WORD* is one of the most frequently used noun lemmas in the English language, ranking at number 35, just before *FAMILY* (Leech et al., 2001). Among verbs, several items referring to linguistic activities occur in the top-100 list, among them *SAY* (at rank 5), *TELL* (24), *MEAN* (27), *WRITE* (51), *TALK* (66), and *SPEAK* (85). The considerable frequency of such terms illustrates the importance of the metalinguistic function in language; since communication itself is such a central human activity, we have a need to refer to it often. Referring to language itself was included as one of six basic functions of human language in Roman Jakobson's (e.g. 1990) functionalist model dating from the 1950s. Since then, human language has been seen as “a unique communicative system in that it can be used to

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describe and represent itself” (Jaworski et al., 2004:3). Furthermore, the metalinguistic function of language has been declared a language universal (Hockett, 1977:173); indeed, it is difficult to imagine a language whose users would have no means to refer to language or communication itself.

Although metalinguistic phenomena are generally under-researched in linguistics, they have received relatively extensive treatment from the perspective of metaphor. One of the classic contributions in this area is Reddy’s (1979) description of the CONDUIT metaphor as playing an important role in English metalanguage and our everyday understanding of communication. The CONDUIT metaphor essentially states that “THE MIND IS A CONTAINER, IDEAS ARE ENTITIES, and communication involves taking ideas out of the mind, putting them into words, and sending them to other people” (Lakoff, 1987:450), as in ‘It is very difficult to *put* this concept *into* words’ (Reddy, 1979:190). It is the sender’s task to find the right containers (words) to convey the intended message, while the recipient’s task is to extract the intended message from the containers (cf. Martin, 2004:81). Most linguists would agree that this is an oversimplified—indeed, likely completely flawed—model of communication. What worried Reddy was that, if this is how we systematically talk about communication in English,¹ it must also reflect our thinking about it. The ‘thinking’ part of this pioneering piece of research inspired the theory of conceptual metaphor (Grady, 1998:205). The Reddy study has also generated a great deal of research into metaphors for communication specifically. Most of this research has shown that the importance of the CONDUIT metaphor was exaggerated: Vanparys (1995:17), for example, found that Reddy’s pessimistic characterization was undermined by “the wide range of conceptualizations conventionalized in the English lexicon[:] rather than imposing one single model, the English language as a metalanguage gives its users the opportunity to select from a rich gamut of expressions”. In addition to the conduit source domain, Goossens (1995b) found three source domains in his corpus-based dictionary study: violent action (*throw mud at* for “speak badly of”), sounds produced by humans (*blow one’s own trumpet*) and body parts such as the tongue or the mouth (*bite off one’s tongue*).

While research into metaphor has taken off—not only in the domain of communication, but also in countless other semantic fields—the role of metonymy in talk about language and communication has been less explored. The balance needs redressing, especially considering the increasing body of research into figurative language demonstrating that metonymy is more prevalent than has previously been thought. Traditional accounts have portrayed metonymy as rather peripheral, but starting with the work of Jakobson in the second half of the 20th century, metonymy and metaphor were paid equal attention (see Dirven, 2009:1). More recent work suggests that metonymy is a central phenomenon in language; indeed, a “cornerstone of human cognition and ordinary language use” (Nerlich and Clarke, 1999:197).

What is hypothesized in the present work is that metonymy—not only metaphor—is central in the semantic field of verbal communication. The hypothesis is tested empirically in a bottom-up, corpus-based study of an abstract noun referring to language itself: *WORD*. Some corpus-based work on metonymy exists, much of which is restricted to body part nouns (e.g. Deignan and Potter, 2004; Hilpert, 2007; Mol, 2004); these studies all show that metonymy is a very frequent phenomenon. The research questions of the present study are as follows:

1. In what metonymic patterns is *WORD* involved?
2. To what extent is *WORD* used figuratively? Specifically, how commonly is *WORD* involved in metonymy, and how does this compare to its metaphorical usage?
3. How do the proportions of figurative and non-figurative uses compare to concrete body part nouns examined in previous corpus-based research?
4. Do the singular and plural forms of the lemma pattern differently with respect to proportion of metonymic uses? The hypothesis that different forms of the same lemma tend to pattern differently in actual language use is tested.
5. To what extent is *WORD* involved in conventionalized linguistic patterns? The hypothesis that figurative examples have a greater proportion of conventionalized forms than literal examples (e.g. Deignan and Potter, 2004:1238) is tested.

The organization of the results section follows the order of the research questions above. Before the results are presented, further background will be given on metonymy and on metaphor in the domain of verbal communication (sections 2 and 3), followed by a description of the methodology used for the study (section 4).

2. Background on metonymy

Metonymy is gaining a more foregrounded position in linguistics, as the traditional view of metonymy as a mere rhetorical device is challenged by the more recent view of metonymy as a fundamental cognitive process. This also means that metonymy is increasingly less overshadowed by its figurative twin, metaphor. Indeed, the relationship between the two is characterized by equality in a recent encyclopaedic entry, stating that “metonymy has come to be recognized as a

¹ Note that this was presented as a cultural model rather than stemming from a common experiential basis.

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