What is Metaphorical Meaning?

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Literal vs Speaker Meaning

Analytic philosophy of language has been largely devoted to the study of literal meaning, or what is said. However, we know that often times we are able to convey something over and above this literal meaning, giving us an implied meaning. For example, we can take the sentence “the cops are around the corner” and interpret this in many ways.

Literal Meaning is what the conventions of the language tell us.

Speaker Meaning is something communicated over and above what is literally said.

The Comparison View

The Comparison View holds that metaphors are just an elided simile.

“Juliet is the sun”

“Juliet is like the sun”

Benefits

It seems reasonable because we obviously do make some kind of comparison. The view entices us with its simplicity in another manner as well. Instead of having to explain both similes and metaphors, now we only have to explain similes since all metaphors reduce to similes.

Drawbacks

Not all metaphors translate so easily
Ex: “When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/Lends the tongue vows”

The Interaction View

The meanings of the different parts of the sentence interact in a special way, which gives you the overall meaning of the sentence.

Juliet: is woman, beautiful, intelligent, I love her
The Sun: the center of the universe, made of matter
The meaning: Juliet is the center of my universe

Benefits

This view explains the cognitive relevance of metaphors. In addition, it allows us to make comparisons using things that the speaker and the hearer know are not real.
Ex: “Juliet is a dragon”

Drawbacks

Again, we see that not all metaphors translate so easily. In addition, we encounter a problem with the semantics. With this view, each word means something specific so if you change any of the words, then you are changing the meaning of the entire utterance.
Ex: “Juliet is the sun” or “Lady Capulet is the sun”

The Pragmatic View

This view is centered on speaker meaning and it consists of a series of steps that the hearer takes in order to understand the metaphor.

Step 1: The hearer decides whether to look for a non-literal interpretation
Step 2: The hearer uses principles to guide them in determining options for what the speaker intends
Step 3: The hearer identifies what it is that the speaker means

Benefits

Since this is centered on speaker meaning, it allows us to explain metaphors more comprehensively.
Ex: “Jill is a philosopher”

Drawbacks

Not all utterances used metaphorically will make the hearer examine it more closely.
Ex: “No man is an island”

In this view, we are saying “A is B” but metaphorically “A is C”. So we hear, “Juliet is the Sun” but we don’t have a specific method to finding out what this ‘C’ actually is.

What now?

Is there really any distinct metaphorical meaning, and if there is, how do we reconcile the objections in order to create a well rounded and realistic approach?

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