

METAPHOR, SKEPTICISM, UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

This paper examines the idea that metaphor is a basic cognitive tool from a Wittgensteinian point of view. One specific aspect of Wittgenstein's legacy is explored, namely his account of verbal understanding. Two interconnected and notoriously difficult features of this account are highlighted and discussed: the idea that linguistic understanding is not an event or a process, but an "abiding condition" (Philosophical Investigations, §143-84); and the idea that neither the meaning of a linguistic expression nor our understanding of it can ever go beyond our capacity of explaining it (Philosophical Investigations, §75). This perspective is shown to be particularly apt in reflecting upon the virtues of metaphor as a means of understanding, especially because it allows for the avoidance of both essentialist and skeptical accounts.

Keywords: metaphor, understanding, explanation, skepticism, Wittgenstein.

This text addresses the widespread notion that metaphor is a basic cognitive principle, a distinctively human means of understanding.

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As is well known, this idea tends to go hand in hand with mentalist theories, for which language is ultimately a system of representation responsible for some sort of objective mental alignment between signifiers and signifieds. Such representationalist commitment seems to persist despite consistent contemporary efforts to “deflate” the parcel of meaning that is to be taken as immanent to language and reproduced trans-subjectively in the minds of speakers – despite general acknowledgment that meaning is, to a large extent, locally constructed and contingent to irreducible historical, cultural, contextual factors.¹ Whatever the case, metaphoric projections are here recognized as mental processes endowed with enough regularity as to be converted into eligible objects of general theories. Such theories are in turn usually built upon a belief in the stable identity of a foundational domain of literal meaning, some sort of common (universal?) cognitive ground, capable of restricting a priori, even if minimally, the paths and possibilities of metaphoric transferences and of human understanding.

As is equally well known, however, such a belief is challenged by a significant number of important contemporary philosophers concerned with language and meaning, notably by L. Wittgenstein - whose thought this paper explores. In the company of many other authors of anti-foundationalist persuasion, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, Wittgenstein urges us to renounce the traditional view of language as a system of representation, grounded on some sort of essence, anchored on some bottom of supposedly literal correspondences between forms and meanings.

Within such frameworks, in which what characterizes language is exactly the *lack* of a bottom or foundation, it is often the case that metaphor, far from being recognized as a basic cognitive principle, is viewed much to the contrary as a kind of emblem of the ultimate impossibility of knowledge. It is perhaps in this spirit that Nietzsche says that

When we talk about trees, colors, snow and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves,

and yet we only possess metaphors of the things, and these metaphors do not in the least correspond to the original essentials. ([1873] 1911, p. 178, my emphasis)

With faith on the possibility of a direct literal experience of the world lacking, the omnipresence of metaphors in human affairs would only bear witness to the resistance of meaning to stability: without ever getting to know anything, we would only have metaphors of metaphors of metaphors, in an endless, undecidable, interpretive process. As the famous Nietzschean apothegm goes, under this view, “there are no facts, only interpretations”. Far from being the possible object of a general theory, metaphor would stand here as the reason for the very impossibility of *any* general theory. In the words of Derrida, metaphor would itself be, paradoxically, a “classical philosopheme”, a metaphysical notion that “is enveloped in the field that a general metaphorology would seek to dominate”, a notion that cannot, however, “be dominated by what it itself has engendered, has made to grow on its own soil” (1982, p. 219)

With some degree of oversimplifying violence, we could say thus that the adoption of a radically pragmatic anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist view of language and meaning may work as an invitation to skepticism. For an alliance seems to be made between the belief in metaphor’s omnipresence and the (very traditional) idea that metaphor is an utterly unpredictable phenomenon, capable of generating an infinite interpretive drift, hostile to any general theory (see Martins 2005).

Visiting Wittgenstein’s thought can be of interest in this context, for it opens the possibility of reconciling an anti-essentialist view of language with the idea that metaphor is after all a human means of understanding. This is so because it provides us with a notion of *understanding* that manages to steer its way between two equally emphatic Wittgensteinian imperatives: the imperative to resist the “craving for generality” (BB 17-18) characteristic of essentialist theories, on the one hand, and the imperative to resist skepticism, on the other. As a preparation to examine, under this light, the notion that metaphor

is a basic cognitive principle, I now turn to address briefly two famously complicated aspects of Wittgenstein's notion of verbal understanding.

The aspects I refer to are (1) the idea that understanding is not something that *happens* in mind during verbal interaction – that it is not a mental event, state, process, or distinctive experience – but rather an *ability*, an *abiding condition* (PI§143-84); and (2) the idea that neither the meaning of a linguistic expression nor our understanding of it can ever extend beyond our capacity of *explaining* it – in other words, the idea that there is a symmetry (an internal relationship) between *understanding* and *explaining* (PI§75).

Let us begin, then, by briefly recalling a few of Wittgenstein's important ideas on the nature of verbal understanding and explanation. As is typical of his style, he enhances the traditional picture he wants to disturb, before actually disturbing it – as if to make us aware of the high bets we may be placing on it inadvertently, prompting us to question our reasons for doing so at all.

With regard to *verbal understanding*, we are invited to rethink our readiness to accept psychological and mechanistic accounts. Wittgenstein explores the appeal of this kind of account before undermining it explicitly. For it seems indeed very plausible to adopt the traditional view of verbal understanding as a mental event triggered by words. For what else if not the presence of some sort of inner happening might account for the difference of, say, understanding utterances spoken in a familiar language and confronting the opaque signs of an unknown one? Or for our being able to understand, say, an order without complying with it? Or yet for our ability to report that we had meant something different with our words, that we have been misinterpreted? All these reflections do seem to reinforce our inclination to think that understanding is the abstract mental accompaniment of words – to think, as Wittgenstein puts it, that “uttering a word is like striking a note in the keyboard of imagination” (IF, §6).

Now, a legitimate question would be: what exactly *is* this inner happening that supposedly constitutes understanding? If the traditional picture is to hold, it should accommodate the fact that, although it is

possible that we sometimes experience something distinctive when we understand, this is neither a *necessary* nor a *sufficient* condition for understanding to take place. In fact, we normally *do not* go through anything noticeable when we understand sentences and words – we do not, so to speak, go about hearing notes played on the keyboard of our imagination.

The stock response to that is, of course, to reaffirm the mental phenomena, while denying that they are conscious: they would be too quick to be captured by the eye of the mind, “like the racing needle of a sewing machine” (Hacker & Baker, 1980, p. 328). Furthermore, within this view, such unconscious mental phenomena should not be random and subjective inner happenings, but uniform, stable, and objective ones, if they are to account for the regularity of verbal understanding in ever changing new contexts and situations. In other words, the traditional model invites us to consider verbal understanding as something akin to a mechanism. As Wittgenstein puts it, it leads us to believe that “if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it, he is operating a calculus according to definite rules” (PI§81).

Having enhanced the appeal and the usual rationales of the traditional picture, Wittgenstein sets out to undermine it, asking his (by now) well-known embarrassing questions: but what kind of unconscious mental phenomenon would understanding be after all? A state? A process? Well, but are not states and processes things that have a genuine duration, that can be continuous, are interruptible etc.? I can say that I have been in a state of agitation all morning or that I mentally recollected my shopping list while she went on talking about Wittgenstein – but is there such a thing as being *in a state of understanding*? And while I can say that mentally recollected my shopping list is an articulated process going on in my mind, can I really say the same for understanding what someone says to me?

As we have seen, *if* understanding were to be conceived as a state or a process, it would have to be a hypothetical, non-introspectible, state or process – and it would indeed have to be something very different from what we normally call states or processes. It would have

to be the state or process of a mysterious *mechanism* – some ineffable calculating center inside our minds – either mental but hidden or neural and awaiting scientific discovery (cf. Baker & Hacker, 1980, p. 330).

But, in Wittgenstein's suggestion, the postulation of such a mechanism is no more than a high bet we place, largely because we cling to a false picture of what the nature of meaning and understanding *should* be. It is to encourage us to give up this false picture that Wittgenstein urges us to refrain from thinking that

the whole point of communication lies in this: someone else grasps the sense of my words – which is something mental: he as it were takes it into his own mind. If he then does something further with it as well, that is no part of the immediate purpose of language (PI§363).

According to Wittgenstein, a good reason for reconsidering our loyalty to this picture would be to realize that the *only* criteria for ascribing understanding that we do have lie exactly in *praxis*, in what one *does* after hearing someone else's words. Taking this angle, we might entertain the possibility that verbal understanding is not something that *consists* in any specific mental happenings or calculations going on in "lightning speed" during episodes of interaction (Baker & Hacker 1984, p. 354). Understanding a sentence will be akin to understanding a language (IFS199) – it will be thus an *abiding condition*, an *unreliable* ability, manifest in the way we live and act.

From this viewpoint, understanding would not be some occult phenomenon, inaccessible to the conscious mind – indeed, it would not be something qualitatively different from the public criteria we use to decide whether someone understood what was said. What determines whether or not we understand is nothing other than our capacity to show understanding in the way we act. And this amounts to saying that, in the end, what determines whether or not we understand something is our acts' being accepted as legitimate moves in the relevant

language games, their being considered adequate in particular situations, according to the customs of particular cultures, at particular moments in history, and so on. But doesn't this make the understanding of a linguistic expression something alarmingly contingent and variable, something that ultimately depends on elusive and often questionable standards of normality? In a sense, it does. Taking the Wittgensteinian angle means acknowledging that *that* uniform and objective mental operation that, in the traditional picture, was only "apparently" not there (given its subconscious nature) *is indeed not there at all*. It means recognizing that verbal understanding cannot be reduced to *any* sort of trans-subjective calculus.²

The radical implications of this non-psychological and non-reductionistic view of verbal understanding to the idea that metaphor is a basic cognitive principle should not be underestimated. I will come back to them briefly, but for now we should turn to Wittgenstein's reflections on *explaining*, a concept that is, to him, internally related to that of understanding.

As we have seen, Wittgenstein suggests that understanding is better grasped as an irreducible ability, manifest in the way we act: well, one of the possible human acts that is especially revealing of understanding is precisely that of *explaining*. If I say to you that *Maria has pneumonia*, you will have understood me if you act accordingly: if you sympathize, or offer help, or make any other acceptable move in this language game (moves that are of course *not* predetermined). But if you don't understand me, and ask, for instance, *What is pneumonia?*, then my subsequent act, the act of explaining the word to you, is a crucial indication that I myself understand this word. Trivial as this point may sound at first, Wittgenstein's insistence on making it is aimed at reminding us of at least three important interrelated features of explanations of language and meaning.

Firstly, we are reminded that such explanations are themselves *always* moves within language games – that they can never exist above, outside or without the realm of human practices. An explanation is, from this angle, always the correlate of a *request* for explanation (Glock,

1996, p. 112). This means that explanations are, so to speak, always “interested”, always a function of what, in the complex web of human relations, prompted their request in the first place.

Secondly, we are reminded that neither the meaning of a linguistic expression nor our understanding of it can ever extend beyond our capacity to explain it: what has to be explained – say, the meaning of a verbal expression – is not something deeper and more theoretical than whatever is likely to come up in our accepted practices of explaining it, which means that any explanation of verbal understanding should in the end be familiar to its participants (cf. Baker & Hacker, 1980, p. 30).

And finally, Wittgenstein’s account of explanation strongly indicates that, being no more than moves in the relevant language games, explanations of meaning can never correspond to *causal explanations* – elucidations that would bring to light the rules that govern the game, so to speak, “from the outside”. Explanations of meaning and understanding are in this sense *normative*: they take the form “*that’s how we use this word*”, “*that’s how we do things in this particular tribe*”. What they *do not* provide is a general formula that explains *why* a term is used on some occasion; what they do not give us is a rule that contains in itself all of its applications. The traditional idea that we are indeed in possession of such superlative rules, but are only sometimes unable to explain them, would be incompatible with Wittgenstein’s insistence on the symmetry between understanding and explaining.

As S. Cavell aptly observes in this respect, “to know the meaning of a word is to be able to go on with it in new contexts – (...) and you can do this without knowing, so to speak, the formula that determines the fresh occurrence, that is, without being able to articulate the criteria in terms of which it is applied.” (1996, p. 42). Accepting such a conception of what it is to know or to understand the meaning of words is, at the same time, accepting that explanations of meaning and understanding are always limited and partial, or rather, that they are always complete only up to the point that they serve their circumstantial purposes. It is then under the imperative to curb the “craving for generality” that

Wittgenstein develops his reflections on meaning, understanding, and explanation. But where does this leave us with respect to the thesis that metaphor is a basic cognitive principle?

As it should be clear from this brief assessment, Wittgenstein's thoughts on understanding and explaining discourage the view that metaphors or metaphoric projections are well understood if taken as uniform abstract mental processes, ultimately grounded on a literal domain of language and existence. If one is inclined to accept this point, a further question will be whether metaphor can still be taken as a means of understanding or if, on the contrary, it should be recognized as the very sign of the impossibility of understanding. In other words: does renouncing a representationalist and essentialist view on language and metaphor lead inevitably to skepticism?

That it is possible to see Wittgenstein's thought on language as paving the way to epistemological skepticism is a more or less established fact (see Hacker, 2001, ch. 2). Michael Williams, for example, places considerable emphasis on Wittgenstein's name in a text called "Death of epistemology". And Saul Kripke polemically argues that Wittgenstein has invented a new version of skepticism – rule-following skepticism (see Kripke, 1982). More importantly, Wittgenstein himself more than once acknowledged the negative thrust of his own thoughts: in his diary of 1931, he suggested that his name might survive as "the name of him who burnt the library of Alexandria". And, in an even more somber mood, he writes, in *Culture and Value*, "I destroy, I destroy, I destroy" (quoted in Hacker, 2001, p. 36).

However, as negative as he may sound occasionally, Wittgenstein provides us with a much more generous set of reflections that lead us away from skepticism, as is especially the case of his discussion of the knowledge of other minds. It is important here to pay some attention to the way Wittgenstein deals with the "ghost" of the skeptical threat, considering the assiduity with which it seems to haunt those who subscribe anti-essentialist views of language, and, more importantly, the potential connections between metaphor and skepticism. What

would then be a Wittgensteinian response to the skeptic, and how does it impact thought on metaphor?

Skepticism typically presents itself in history as *the only* alternative intellectual attitude to the craving for generality that comes with the belief in metaphysical absolutes. So if, as we have seen, one is disinclined to accept that understanding and meaning are phenomena whose regularity can be reduced to a calculus, then one may be tempted to feel that the only option left is skeptical “suspension of judgment”, acceptance that knowledge is impossible after all. Likewise, if one is in the business of providing explanations for understanding and meaning in language and confronts the infallible recalcitrance of these phenomena to general causal explanations, then one may feel that *no explanation at all* can be provided for them.

Such an interpretation is, however, radically incompatible with one of Wittgenstein’s most important insights, as many of his readers would agree. I refer to the notion that there is a fundamental *unity* between the skeptic’s position and that of his rival: the skeptical conviction that knowledge (of the external world, of other minds, of language) is impossible is just another symptom of the *same* philosophical disease that leads to the search for metaphysical absolutes. For in order to say things like “*knowledge is impossible; we cannot be certain of anything*”, the skeptic must be using words like *knowledge* and *certainty* in the same superlative sense which is given to them by his metaphysical rival. That is: if we become radically suspicious of our normal practices of understanding and explaining, it can only be because we still cling to the idea that *there must be* higher routes of knowledge to which we have no access. Yes, understanding is an irreducible ability, and, yes, explanation is always a partial, interested, context-bound manifestation of this ability. But this *does not* turn understanding and explanation into *illusions* of understanding and explaining. For they would be illusions as compared to what? No: this *is* what understanding and explaining are, full stop.

So, with regards to metaphor under a Wittgensteinian perspective, while it is not well explained as an abstract generalizable mental

accompaniment of words, it is equally misunderstood if taken as a trigger to unlimited interpretive drift, as an open invitation to skepticism. Whatever the way we use Wittgenstein's ideas to reflect upon metaphor, it will have to acknowledge our practices of *saying* of some things "metaphor"; and of other things, "literal". And it will have to acknowledge the fact that these practices are possible in the absence of general formulae determining the meaning of the words "metaphor" and "literal" in absolute terms. I suggested elsewhere that metaphor could be understood, in a Wittgensteinian inspiration, as the ever recurrent impulse of our "tribe" (human? western?) to distinguish and cross language games: space and time, seeing and knowing, love and war etc (Martins 2005). I would like to end this contribution by pointing out another important aspect of Wittgenstein's legacy to the study of metaphor, an aspect that has to do with the place of metaphor within our acts of understanding and explaining.

If Wittgenstein's point about the symmetry between understanding and explaining is fully absorbed, then the idea that metaphor is a basic cognitive principle can be invested with a new meaning, one that seems capable of resisting both essentialism and skepticism.

We move in this direction when we realize not only that the practice of intercrossing language games is a pervasive and often highly conventionalized one within the compulsory legacy of our languages, but also that our deliberate *acts of explaining* may (and often do) mobilize such intercrossing games, by exploring the most conventional as well as the most subtle and unsuspected kinships, by actually creating the most extraordinary kinships. We explain time as if it were space, and Julia Roberts as if she were a cross between Audrey Hepburn, Lucille Ball and Bambi; or in finer, less populated, attunements we explain love as if it were *a pain that rages without hurting* (Camões). None of these metaphorical explanations are grounded on any absolute foundation. But the fact remains that we (some of us) recognize ourselves and our world in these explanations. And, as S. Cavell (1996) aptly suggests in a text called "Knowing and Acknowledging", recognition might well be a very important inflection of cognition.

Be that as it may, it should be clear by now that, from a Wittgensteinian angle, theoretical explanations about the role of metaphor in human cognition should not lose sight of the fact that a metaphor *can* be a perfectly legitimate means of understanding, without being grounded on any essential foundations.

Notes

1. The kind of “deflated” representationalism I refer to here is salient, for example, in most studies of metaphor triggered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics (see Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff e Johnson, 1999).
2. This is not to say, of course, that Wittgenstein denies (a) that verbal understanding is submitted to rules or (b) that mental/brain happenings are a necessary condition to understanding. The omnipresence of the games analogy in the *Philosophical Investigations* testifies to his conviction that language and meaning are regulated phenomena. What is denied is solely the traditional idea that language and understanding are governed by the rules of an abstract autonomous calculus (see Martins 2000).

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