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# On metonymy☆

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the phenomena traditionally treated as cases of metonymy and to suggest a way of accounting for their production and comprehension. Metonymy is widely defined as a referential shorthand whose success is grounded on empirical associations among objects. I argue that this 'associationist' view (underlying the classical, the cognitive linguistics and the Gricean approach to metonymy) is in itself inadequate for a complete descriptive and explanatory account of metonymy. I propose instead that metonymy is a variety of interpretive use as defined within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) and that its cognitive and communicative role can be very effectively treated by the general relevance-theoretic framework. I offer a number of applications of my approach which explain the on-line comprehension of metonymy, the variety of effects metonymic expressions can have, the relation between metonymy and metaphor, and the existence of a continuum of lexical metonymic uses with various degrees of conventionalisation.

## 1. Introduction

According to the classical definition, metonymy is "a figure in which one word is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation" (Preminger and Brogan, 1993). Some typical substitutions include author for work, place for a characteristic product of that place, object for possessor, abstract features for concrete entities, etc., and are exemplified below:

(1) Have you read Graham Greene?
(2) Mary wants Burgundy.

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(3) The crown objects to the proposal.
(4) I want my love to be with me all the time.

The rhetorical treatment of metonymy faces an interesting paradox. On the one hand, it captures a range of phenomena which continue to be productive and widespread in a variety of languages; moreover, these seem to be produced and understood naturally and spontaneously. On the other hand, it views metonymy as a 'figure of speech', that is, a departure from the linguistic norm, serving ornamental/literary purposes and demanding suitable training for its successful use and comprehension. The paradox of the classical approach is coupled with (and probably caused by) a lack of explanatory potential: at best, traditional statements about metonymy have some classificatory value but little capacity for precision – much less for prediction. No systematic rationale is offered for the metonymic associations listed in the rhetoric textbooks: their motivation and persistence across societies and languages remain obscure.

The limitations of the traditional rhetorical apparatus do not invalidate the intuitive appeal of its categories; it is the latter which is mainly responsible for the persistence of the study of rhetoric through the ages (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1990). However, the psychological basis of this appeal clearly demands an explanation, involving those mental 'figures' or processes that underlie the figurative linguistic expressions. A psychologically plausible approach may also account in the case of metonymy for its productivity, naturalness and ease of understanding. What I aim to do in this paper is precisely to offer a psychologically informed account of metonymy. My proposal for the comprehension of metonymy locates it within a more general explanatory account of utterance interpretation.

My paper is structured as follows: section 2 is a review of attemtps to deal with metonymy within a cognitive linguistics account of communication and cognition. I argue that the notion of empirical associations among objects is itself inadequate for a complete descriptive and explanatory account of metonymy. I then go on to propose a relevance-theoretic treatment of metonymy. After presenting some basic tenets of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) theory in section 4, I put forth in section 5 the claim that metonymy is a variety of the interpretive use of language (as defined within relevance theory) and can be viewed more specifically as a case of name introduction. In section 6 I argue that this view leads to a better understanding of the comprehension of metonymy. Apart from offering a satisfactory solution to a number of problems which have beset previous approaches to metonymy (see section 7), and capturing the various effects of metonymy in communication (see section 8), the relevance-theoretic approach is shown to have two further important implications: it sheds new light on the relation between metonymy and metaphor, and it naturally accommodates the fact that metonymy is not a natural class but rather a continuum of cases (section 9).

## 2. Metonymy and associationism

### 2.1. Previous accounts of metonymy

Within the pragmatic literature, the first extensive studies of metonymy belong to Nunberg (1978, 1979) and Fauconnier (1985). According to Nunberg, metonymy is a case of "deferred reference", in which a speaker uses a description of *a* and succeeds in referring to *b*.[1] Metonymic uses are considered a subcategory of "local" word uses, i.e. uses which "a speaker believes are *generally* perceived as rational against a system of beliefs that is available only to a sub-section of the community" (Nunberg, 1978: 186). To illustrate this point Nunberg gives the following classic example:

(5) The ham sandwich is getting restless.

When (5) is uttered among waiters in a restaurant, the metonymic expression can be used to identify a customer who has ordered a ham sandwich. This use is justified only against a specific set of beliefs shared by the waiters, according to which customers can be identified through their orders. Against these beliefs, the mapping from orders to customers has become especially useful for uniquely picking out a referent and distinguishing it from other possible candidates; in psychological terms, it has acquired high cue-validity.

The licensing of cue-validity through cultural beliefs is evoked to explain impossible metonymies. On this view, the acceptability of (6) is due to the widespread belief that a creative individual is largely responsible for the distinctive value of her creation – thus acquiring high cue-validity; in (7), however, no such belief holds:

(6) a. The collector recently bought two more Picassos.
b. If you want to study Classics, you have to know Homer pretty well.
c. My boss always wears Chanel.
(7) ?Mary won the cooking contest, although Jane was very tasty as well.

Nunberg's analysis is largely adopted by Fauconnier (1985: 3ff.). Fauconnier also sees metonymy as a subcase of deferred reference, which is enabled by the establishment of links between objects "for psychological, cultural, or locally pragmatic reasons"; these links are captured by pramatic mappings which Fauconnier terms "connectors". In his model deferred reference is governed by the more general "Identification Principle":

*Identification Principle*

If two objects (in the most general sense), a and b, are linked by a pragmatic function $F$ ($b = F(a)$), a description of $a$, $d_a$, may be used to identify its counterpart b.

[1] Actually in a more recent treatment of the topic Nunberg considers metonymy as a case of property transfer (Nunberg, 1993). I will not discuss this proposal here.

Fauconnier addresses the question of the connectors' creation and comprehension only in passing. He proposes that connectors form part of what Lakoff has called 'Idealised Cognitive Models' (ICMs) (see mainly Lakoff, 1987). ICMs are considered products of human conceptualising capacities; they are composed of complex concepts and general categories, and correspond to the conceptual structures available to humans for making sense of their experience. Metonymic connectors are taken to operate among elements belonging to a single ICM. Speakers are typically able to learn new connectors according to the various mappings among objects they are encouraged to perform on experiential or cultural grounds.

The idea behind Nunberg's and Fauconnier's accounts of metonymy, i.e. the existence of associations licensed by cultural/experiential factors, was taken up and developed by cognitive linguists. According to Lakoff (1987: 84–85), metonymy is not a linguistic object, but a conceptual or cognitive organisation expressed by a linguistic object. This cognitive organisation corresponds to a 'metonymic model' and has the following characteristics:

(a) There is a 'target' concept A to be understood for some purpose in some context.
(b) There is a conceptual structure containing both A and another concept B.
(c) B is either part of A or closely associated with it in that conceptual structure. Typically, a choice of B will uniquely determine A, within that conceptual structure.
(d) Compared to A, B is either easier to understand, easier to remember, easier to recognize, or more immediately useful for the given purpose in the given context.
(e) A metonymic model is a model of how A and B are related in a conceptual structure; the relationship is specified by a function from B to A.

When such a conventional metonymic model exists as part of a conceptual system, it is claimed, B may be used to stand, metonymically, for A. Metonymic models are thus subvarieties of Idealised Cognitive Models. Their grounding is provided by direct physical or causal associations of objects in human experience, which are captured by mappings within a single conceptual organisation; in this sense they differ from metaphoric models, which link elements of different conceptual domains, given that there is a structural similarity between the ICMs that underlie these domains. Some metonymic models involve categories, but most of them involve individuals. In any case, they form a central component of human thought, and are attributed an important role in mental processes such as reasoning and inferencing.[2]

Apart from its role in understanding, metonymy fulfils mainly referential functions in communication. Again its use and recovery are thought to be constrained by a body of social beliefs. For instance, it is often the case that a number of metonymic

[2] I cannot criticise the claims about metonymic reasoning here; it seems though that cognitive linguistics is stretching an already ill-defined category, metonymy, to cover phenomena as diverse as prototype effects and iconic gestures (see the overview in Gibbs, 1994). For criticism of the school's similar inflation of the term 'metaphor' see Jackendoff and Aaron (1991).

models instantiates a single general metonymic pattern which is particularly productive within a given community; it is by virtue of the general pattern that the isolated metonymies will be understood. In the following examples from Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 38–39), the various metonymies are taken to be comprehended on the basis of more general patterns; the metonymies in (8) fall under the pattern PLACE FOR INSTITUTION, and those in (9) under the pattern PLACE FOR EVENT:

(8) a. The White House isn't saying anything.
b. Paris is introducing longer skirts this season.
c. Hollywood isn't what it used to be.
d. Wall Street is in a panic.
(9) a. Remeber the Alamo.
b. Pearl Harbour still has an effect on our foreign policy.
c. Watergate changed our politics.

Although this presentation is extremely condensed, the general idea should be clear: while correctly dismissing the notion of 'figure of speech', there is an obvious sense in which all three approaches retain the essence of the rhetorical definition of metonymy. I want to argue that the traditional idea of grounding metonymy on empirical associations between objects is in itself inadequate on both descriptive and explanatory levels; I also want to demonstrate some further inherent limitations of the above accounts. The arguments in the following section are meant to go some way towards supporting these claims.

### 2.2. *Objections to the associationist views*

#### 2.2.1. *Metonymic conceptualisation*

Within cognitive linguistics the idea that metonymic conceptualisation exploits empirical links among objects flows directly from a broader theoretical tenet, according to which concept formation is guided by (external) experiential and cultural factors rather than by the (in-built) human capacity for abstraction. On this apporach, all innate cognitive structure is *embodied*, i.e. based on bodily experience and recurrent patterns of interaction with the environment (see Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). Concrete concepts emerge as a result of the interplay between gestalt perception, bodily movement, physical experience and cultural learning. All abstract concepts are understood on the basis of concrete ones via metaphoric projection.

The associationist doctrine which underlies the cognitive linguistics approach is quite at odds with contemporary research on linguistics and cognitive development (see Jackendoff and Aaron, 1991: 332, and references therein).[3] In general, it has been convincingly argued that the more richness and complexity one wishes to attribute to mental representations of the world, the richer and more complex must be the underlying resources that one attributes to the mind prior to learning. Any the-

[3] In this paragraph I have drawn heavily on Jackendoff and Aaron's arguments.

ory of concept formation has to assume as premise the existence of a powerful innate machinery for forming abstract categories.

Consider the resources presupposed by the associationist account of the comprehension of metonymy. Where do Nunberg's pragmatic functions, Fauconnier's connectors and Lakoff and Johnson's metonymic concepts come from? If one is to recognise some sort of structured cognitive models including 'stand-for' relations, one must surely concede the existence of a cognitive apparatus prior to experience which will provide the structure for these models. This means that concepts like PART, WHOLE, CONTAINER, CONTAINED, CAUSE, ACTION and so on, must be attributed some cognitive priority (a point recognised by Lakoff himself – see Lakoff, 1987). Crucially, it also means that the ability for relating PART and WHOLE in the model PART FOR WHOLE has to be there before any experiential input; it is not present in the environment and cannot be taught. The same holds for all 'substitutions' listed in discussions of metonymy, such as CONTAINER FOR CONTAINED, CAUSE FOR EFFECT, etc.

Of course the claim that metonymy represents a basic human conceptualising capacity is often repeated in the cognitive linguistic literature (see Lakoff, 1987: 77, and Gibbs, 1994: 320; cf. the idea of 'reference-point construction' or 'active-zone phenomenon' in Langacker, 1993). In practice, however, it is immediately abandoned when it comes to the interpretation of metonymic expressions. The latter, as I showed, is believed to be achieved on the basis of the automatic retrieval of cultural/experiential associations. The cognitive principle becomes redundant and the favourite dogma of associationism regains its full force.

### 2.2.2. *Metonymic concepts*

As a result of the confused division of labour between cognitive and social aspects of metonymy, the status and role of many 'metonymic concepts' is highly dubious. Particularly telling are some inconsistencies in the list of metonymic concepts cited in Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 38). On the one hand, their examples include such diverse concepts as PART FOR WHOLE and INSTITUTION FOR PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE; it is at least arguable that the first is cognitively more basic and can subsume a number of other metonymic concepts in its scope (among them possibly INSTITUTION FOR PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE). This is something the authors concede elsewhere by stating that PART FOR WHOLE is an important component of our conceptual make-up (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 37).

On the other hand, the instantiations of a single metonymic concept do not always form a natural class. Consider the concept OBJECT USED FOR USER:

(10) a. The buses are on strike.
b. Are you the cab parked outside?
c. I wouldn't marry a Mercedes but I could live with a Volvo. (adapted from Cruse, 1992)

If all metonymies that are captured by a particular metonymic function were interpreted on the basis of this function, there should be no difference in the comprehen-

sion of (10a–c) above. This obviously leaves the question of the increasing creativity of the utterances unanswered.

(10) introduces a further problem: what is the level of abstraction on which metonymic functions are to be defined? Why can't we postulate a metonymic concept VEHICLE FOR DRIVER to explain the uses above? Surely associationism could not object to this move; if generalised, however, this approach would result in a long and unexplanatory list of isolated metonymies.

### 2.2.3. *The notion of context*

The accounts of metonymy I presented make use of a very disputable notion of context in order to handle issues of comprehension. Nunberg's (1978) analysis is a good example: metonymy belongs to local word uses which are judged rational only against specific contexts and are thus differentiated from normal word uses (rational context-independently) or metaphorical word uses (irrational in every context but interpretable). 'Context' is taken to mean 'system of beliefs', i.e. a more or less fixed set of assumptions shared by a subset or by the whole of the community and held as (probably) true; this set can be brought to bear on the interpretation of an utterance, and consequently of a word use.

It is obvious that this view of context has little psychological plausibility, since it ignores the richness of background assumptions used in interpretation, and attributes beliefs to (groups of) individuals in a rigid and inflexible way. Context cannot be preexistent and clear-cut for a given act of communication; its construction forms part of the on-line inferential process of utterance interpretation (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 132–142).

### 2.2.4. *Pragmatic issues*

What previous accounts of metonymy essentially lack is a robust pragmatic criterion that could operate on a variety of encyclopedic assumptions (including social beliefs) and would guide the comprehension of metonymy in a way consistent with a general account of utterance interpretation. As they stand, associationist models largely ignore problems of interpretation by pushing them off onto the conceptual structure itself: by definition an association is supposed to spring to mind almost automatically (see clause (c) in Lakoff's definition of a metonymic model), consequently, these approaches can at best deal only with conventionalised metonymies; they are unable to handle really creative, one-off metonymic uses of the type in (11):

(11) You should avoid marrying a sheep at all costs.
(= someone born in the Year of the Sheep; example from a television programme cited in Gerrig, 1989)

Furthermore, Nunberg complains that "to describe the range of possible word-uses *other* than anecdotally, we would need no less than a general account of cognitive structure, so that we could enumerate all of the ways in which categories can be perceived as related" (1978: 100). However a general pragmatic criterion should have the power of predicting which metonymies are possible in a given context on the

basis of the hearer's estimated capacity to understand them. It should thus provide a way of capturing the intuitively appealing notion of cue-validity. By the same token it should be able to incorporate the context-dependence of metonymy and the role of processing cues (which seem largely responsible for the unacceptability of examples like (7)).

*2.2.5. Referential uses of metonymy*

There is a further undesirable consequence of associationism which is of interest: by considering metonymy as a mapping between concepts, one is bound to disregard its connection to the outside world, in particular the role it often plays in reference. Consider again Nunberg's example:

(5) The ham sandwich is getting restless.

What is crucial here is not so much that there exists a connection between order and customer in the encyclopedic memory of the waiters, but rather the fact that a particular concept/expression has been used to identify a given individual. Therefore metonymy is not so much a mapping between two concepts as a novel conceptualisation of an external entity.

This fact should also provide a way of dealing with the variety of effects created by metonymy. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 37) remark, metonymy "allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to"; unfortunately this is as close as they get to giving a general explanation of the effects of metonymic uses. In view of an example like (5), they observe that the speaker "is not interested in the person as a person but only as a customer, which is why the use of such a sentence is dehumanizing" (1980: 39). Obviously an adequate account of the comprehension of metonymy should be a lot more precise in capturing how a hearer derives implications from similar uses.

*2.2.6. Metonymy and metaphor*

As mentioned already, apart from metonymic models the cognitive linguistic tradition recognises metaphoric models, which also serve important roles in cognition and communication. This account draws a sharp distinction between the two types of models on both descriptive and explanatory grounds (cf. similar dichotomies in Nunberg, 1978, 1979; Fauconnier, 1985). However, such a clear-cut division cannot always be maintained. This is obvious from occasional mistakes in analysis, such as Lakoff and Johnson's erroneous classification of (12) as a metonymy (1980: 40); it is also clear from the common features metonymy and metaphor share in reference – cf. (13) – and in predication – cf. (14):

(12) It's been Grand Central Station here all day.
(13) a. The pretty face just went out.
b. The pretty doll just went out.
(14) a. Maria is a divine voice.
b. Maria is a nightingale.

These issues will be taken up again in the relevance-based discussion of metonymy. For the moment I hope to have shown that an associationist account of metonymy has a number of serious drawbacks. As far as the cognitive basis of metonymy is concerned, this seems to involve not a series of isolated metonymic concepts, but an abstract human conceptualising capacity, which has a metarepresentational nature and may use salient, contextually available elements to represent objects/individuals in the world (see sections 4–6 below). As for the use and comprehension of particular metonymic expressions, they should be captured by an adequate pragmatic theory, which should naturally incorporate the above cognitive assumption.

An obvious candidate for the pragmatic treatment of metonymy is Grice's theory. Indeed elements of a Gricean approach have on some occasions been combined with a cognitive linguistics apporach to metonymy (see Gibbs, 1994). In the next section I will briefly demonstrate the inadequacies of the Gricean account with regard to the issues raised by metonymy; this part serves as a bridge to the relevance-theoretic account developed later on.

## 3. Some problems for a Gricean account of metonymy

It is not clear how a Gricean account of metonymy might go. Obviously examples like (5) would constitute violations of the maxim of quality, and in that metonymy would resemble the other tropes considered by Grice (1975). A problem that immediately arises concerns the way the hearer retrieves what was meant by the metonymy. In the common case where metonymy is used referentially, the problem is how the hearer moves from what was said to an 'obviously related [implicated] proposition' which contains the intended referent.

Grice's approach is no better equipped to solve this problem than the traditional accounts I have reviewed. As shown by his treatment of metaphor, irony, meiosis and hyperbole, the related 'figurative' implicature is supposed to spring to the hearer's mind almost automatically. This reintroduction of associationism is at odds with Grice's overall inferential account of utterance interpretation. If we believe his account of figurative meaning, trains of thought seem to be guided by notions such as resemblance (generating metaphor) and antinomy (producing irony); the case of metonymy would probably be explained through the evocation of part–whole relations or contiguity. This analysis seems to be open to all the criticisms that have been directed against associationist accounts. Furthermore, in Grice's own terms, an implicature has to be calculable; yet what his account offers in the case of figurative language is a mere inferential step of confirmation of an essentially non-inferential derivation (see Sperber and Wilson, 1985–86).

A further problem is that it would hardly be satisfactory to treat the resolution of metonymy as part of an implicature, since there is a strong intuition that the referent of a metonymic expression contributes to what is said. This intuition is captured by Sag's discussion of the 'ham sandwich' example (see Sag, 1981: 275–276; cf. also Recanati, 1993: 264):

"Is this a case of an absurd literal meaning (an attribution of restlessness to a culinary object) rescued from pragmatic absurdity by the Cooperative Principle augmented by some ancillary principle which guides Gricean inferencing? Or is the shift from ham sandwich to ham sandwich orderer somehow more directly involved in the semantics of such utterances? Perhaps the shift from ham sandwich to individual who is in some relation to a ham sandwich (possibly different from context to context) is like the shift in denotation that accompanies indexical expressions as they are uttered in various contexts. [...] This approach, rather than one of the first kind, where all examples like [(5)] are pushed off to pragmatic theory and are abstracted away from in semantic analysis, is intuitive on the grounds that these transfers seem very different in kind from the kind of inferential operations that lead one from *It's hot in here* to the sense of 'Please open the window', which clearly deserve treatment of the first type."

Sag wants to defend a formal semantic analysis capable of handling issues of context; as far as the pragmatic analysis is concerned, however, he is right to point out that one needs a more elaborate apparatus than the standard Gricean framework in order to capture the difference between metonymy and conversational implicature. Moreover, as I already hinted in discussing (13b), the same problem arises in the case of metaphoric reference: the metaphor should be understood and reference assignment performed in the process of determining what was said. Again it would be counterintuitive and contrary to the rest of Grice's approach to implicatures to treat reference assignment as part of implicated content.

According to Recanati's Availability Principle (see Recanati, 1993: 248), "in deciding whether a pragmatically determined aspect of utterance meaning is part of what is said, [...] we should always try to preserve our pre-theoretic intuitions on the matter". In order to preserve our intuitions and incorporate the interpretation of referential metonymies within what was said, one would need two moves. First, a modification of the Gricean distinction between what was said and what was implicated, and second, a particular process whereby metonymy could be interpreted. In the next sections I develop a way of dealing with these moves.

## 4. Towards a relevance-theoretic account

In what follows I intend to sketch an account of metonymy within the framework of relevance theory. Some basic tenets of the theory are briefly summarised below (for a fuller exposition see Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

Human information processing seeks an optimal balance between consuming mental effort and achieving cognitive effects from a given stimulus (or range of potential stimuli). In other words, it automatically aims at maximising relevance, where the latter is determined in the following way:

(i) Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.
(ii) Other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who processes it.

To communicate is to demand someone's attention, i.e. some expenditure of effort. Hence, to communicate is to imply that the stimulus used (e.g. an utterance) is worth the audience's attention. This is captured by the Principle of Relevance: as far as verbal communication is concerned, the principle predicts that every utterance carries with it a presumption of its own optimal relevance. The presumption of optimal relevance goes as follows:

(a) The set of assumptions {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}.

The hearer is entitled to suppose that the intended interpretation of an utterance is the one that created adequate cognitive effects (e.g. contextual implications) for a minimum of processing effort, in a way that the speaker could manifestly have foreseen. Once such an interpretation is reached, the hearer should look no further; the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is the only one consistent with the principle of relevance.

Understanding an utterance always involves a set of assumptions against which the utterance will be processed. A novel element brought by relevance theory is that this set is not considered preestablished/given, but is constructed each time from among all the assumptions that could contribute to relevance.

It is obvious that inference plays a capital role in the interpretive process. The latter proceeds as hypotheses are formed and evaluated with the purpose of discovering the one that best fits the evidence (the utterance). Apart from recovering the implicit side of what is communicated, pragmatic processing complements semantic knowledge to develop the explicatures of an utterance. Those may include a complete and truth-evaluable proposition derived by developing the utterance's logical form; Sperber and Wilson call this the 'proposition expressed' by the utterance.

These central claims of the theory are given adequate content in the subsequent analysis, which brings them to bear on metonymy. I begin by discussing creative uses, which will then be related to conventionalised ones. My main claim is that metonymic expressions are a variety of interpretive use and correspond to instances of naming (rather than to more straightforward instances of referring).

## 5. Metonymy as a variety of interpretive use

According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Wilson and Sperber, 1988), a representation with a propositional form, say an utterance, is used interpretively when it represents another representation which also has a propositional form by virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms. Interpretive use differs from descriptive use, where a representation is used to depict a state of affairs in the world in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs. Apart

from full propositions, individual concepts or conceptual phrases can be used interpretively and become embedded in propositions asserted by the speaker. Consider the following examples:

(15) a. Mary isn't going to marry the perfect man.
b. Mary isn't going to marry the person she once thought was the perfect man.
c. Mary isn't going to marry the 'perfect man'.

In (15a) the expression *the perfect man* is used descriptively as part of a proposition the speaker intends to assert. In (15b) and (15c) the use of the same expression is interpretive: the speaker incorporates in the propositional form she asserts some conceptual material she attributes to somebody else, either explicitly – (15b) – or implicitly – (15c). Notice that the speaker may also be taken to communicate a variety of attitudes towards the content of the interpretively used material, i.e. she might be endorsing the description or dissociating herself from it. It is equally possible, however, that the speaker does not intend to communicate any element of attitude towards the description she used: she might merely be suggesting the appropriateness of such a description, or wondering about its appropriateness, or indicating that she has heard and registered its use.

Interpretive use of concepts characteristically occurs when a name for an individual or object is introduced for the first time. In such cases a referring expression is traditionally regarded as mentioned rather than used (see Lyons, 1977: 5). Compare:

(16) a. This is a trombone.
b. This is a 'trombone'.

In the first of the above utterances the phrase *a trombone* is used descriptively. In (16b), however, it is used interpretively to mean something like 'the thing that can appropriately be called *trombone*'; it introduces the representation of a representation, a 'self-referring' linguistic expression. Since (16b) contains endorsed interpretive material it is difficult (and very often irrelevant) to separate the truth-conditions of the two utterances; it should be clear though that this is in principle feasible.

Particularly interesting for my purposes are those interpretive uses of expressions that serve to name objects which lie outside their normal extensions. As Kaplan (1989: 558ff.) has noted for proper names, it is possible to create and use a proper name to refer to a given object irrespective of the prior meanings associated with the expression-vehicle. Often this dubbing is not a formal public ceremony but can occur internally, subjectively. As a result, the use of an expression does not conform to the preestablished use/convention any more: the speaker manifests an independent intention to refer to a given object regardless of the particular interpretation of the expressions she used 'as words' (i.e., according to the semantics of the language) – or indeed of whether the utterance had such an interpretation. This intention (which Kaplan calls 'referential') becomes dominant over the intention to use a word with the meaning given to it by the person from whom one learned it (the 'attributive'

intention – cf. Donnellan's terminology for definite descriptions) and results in spontaneous dubbings. An example of such a dubbing is Kaplan's:

(17) Hi, ya, Beautiful!

I want to claim that creative metonymy bears a relation to the cases in (16b) and (17). More specifically, it is a variety of interpretive use which (i) introduces a new name; (ii) has as its intended referent something which does not fall under the normal denotation of the expression. In other words, metonymy involves the novel fixation of reference for an existing expression. At an initial stage this occurs internally, as Kaplan says; at a secondary level, it is used in communication:

(18) Where's the 'Brain' now that we need him?

The referring expression *the "Brain"* in (18) is used interpretively: it is not being put forth as a truthful description of the referent, but as an appropriate way of identifying him in the given context. This situation is parallel to the one in (17): again an expression is 'held up' in order to facilitate access to a concept that is normally not part of its denotation. Like (17) – but unlike (15b,c) – the recognition of the interpretive use does not necessitate that the corresponding descriptive content be attributed (or, indeed, attributable) to a specific source. It is rather understood as a sort of 'cue' present in the speaker's conceptual representation, which provides a cost-efficient mechanism for accessing a referent by invoking what one *might* appropriately call him.

What is the exact nature of the conceptual 'cues' underlying metonymic dubbing? Traditional associationism would answer: links between concepts based on empirical connections (co-occurrence, physical contiguity, and so on). Let me sketch an alternative proposal.

I take it that metonymy is grounded in a more general human cognitive tendency, according to which an individual or object in the world may be identified through one salient property it possesses. Salience is essentially a perceptual fact, and captures every type of property that may be focused upon through the process of selective attention. This property forms part of the encyclopedic entry for the individual or object; each particularly salient property translates into a particularly accessible assumption in the encyclopedic entry. The reason for isolating salient properties and using them in the mental identification of a referent is given by the general tendency of our cognitive system to maximise relevance. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), human information processing seeks an optimal balance between consuming mental effort and achieving cognitive effects from a given stimulus. In other words, it automatically aims at maximising relevance, that is, deriving the greatest cognitive effects possible for the smallest possible effort. It is obvious that the isolation of salient properties of objects or individuals for identification purposes serves precisely the reduction of cognitive effort.

What happens in metonymy is the following: an expression denoting a particularly salient object/property is used interpretively to give access to an individuating

conceptual representation of an individual (or another object) through a highly acessible encyclopedic assumption including the two. The metonymic expression thus functions as a newly coined name for the intended referent; its choice is governed by the fact that it represents the most relevant means of identifying this referent, a fact that squares well with the general cost-efficient orientation of our cognition.

So far I have argued for a treatment of metonymy along the lines of interpretive use. I now want to look more closely at the way metonymy is actually used and understood in communication.

## 6. The comprehension of metonymy

A central claim within the relevance-theoretic framework is that every utterance is an interpretation of a thought of the speaker's (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 230). This interpretation may be literal – in which case there is full identity of propositional form – or less-than-literal. In the case of metonymy, the propositional form of the utterance is a literal interpretation of the thought it purports to express. This thought, however, is complex to the extent that it contains interpretive material. The problems that the hearer faces in the comprehension of metonymy are: (i) to recognise the interpretive use as such; (ii) to pragmatically unpack the interpretive material into an explicit representation of a referent, and thereby to arrive at the thought the utterance purports to convey.

Consider the metonymy in (19):

(19) The piano is in a bad mood.

In order to arrive at the intended interpretation of (19), the hearer pursues an inferential process of hypothesis formation and evaluation using as a starting point the elements made available to him from the decoding of the utterance. Let us suppose that the default hypothesis of this inferential process is that the 'literal' proposition expressed by (19), namely (20), is the intended interpretation of the utterance (see later discussion for elaborations):

(20) The piano is in a bad mood <at time x>.

The hearer will reject (20), since on most occasions it cannot rationally have been put forth by the speaker as being optimally relevant to him. Continuing to look for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, the hearer will form a new hypothesis based on the type of predicate of (19), namely that the referent of the definite description is an individual. In other words, he will assume that the description is used interpretively so that (19) makes a statement about a person; the resulting form of the proposition expressed will be something along the lines of (21):

(21) The person that could appropriately be called 'the piano' is in a bad mood <at time x>.

Note that if the definite description in (19) is taken at face (descriptive) value, it is impossible to retrieve any proposition of the sort in (21) as an approximation of the speaker's thought. The reason is that (20) and (21) do not share any (relevant) logical or contextual implications; they contain different referents and different propositional commitments. By recognising the interpretive nature of the description, the hearer is able to make a new interpretive guess about the thought of the speaker: the propositional form of the utterance is taken to contain a referent and a propositional commitment identical to those of the thought, and the proposition is therefore taken to be a literal interpretation of the latter.

The propositional form in (21) captures the attempt of the hearer to explicitly represent the existence of interpretive material within the proposition expressed. Although the metarepresentational use of language – of which (21) is a subcase – is surrounded by many questions (see Carston, 1994: 338), we can accept that the interpretive content appears within some sort of quotation marks in the semantic representation of (19). Of course, this corresponds only to the first stage of recovering 'what was said': the hearer has to invest some further processing effort in order to arrive at an individuating conceptual representation of the individual who is in a bad mood (I take it that the description is used referentially). He may reasonably assume that the speaker has aimed at optimal relevance and has selected the most relevant linguistic stimulus she could have used to identify the individual in question. Consequently the hearer is entitled to suppose that the most accessible representation of a referent that is activated by the metonymic description and yields a proposition with adequate contextual effects is the intended one.

Imagine that the speaker is a member of a jazz band and utters (19) during a rehearsal. We may assume that, after the initial form of (21), the proposition recovered will receive some further fleshing out. Given the accessibility of the assumption linking the piano and the person playing it (say, John Clark) in this context, (19) can be said to communicate a further, more specific proposition, namely (22):[4]

(22) John Clark is in a bad mood <at time x>.

On this view, metonymy contributes to the explicatures of the utterance; its comprehension forms part of the general inferential work which complements decoding in order to yield the proposition expressed. Note that in cases where the metonymic description does not activate any intermediate assumptions but yields the intended referent directly, metonymy has acquired the ability to function as a directly referential expression. This has happened with many nicknames, which have been used often enough for their referent to be accessed without the intervention of the descriptive 'cue':[5]

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[4] I bypass the specific issues concerning referential definite descriptions (e.g. the question of whether to include the descriptive material within the proposition expressed); for a relevance-theoretic approach to these issues see Rouchota (1992).

[5] The same has happened with a number of definite descriptions which have 'grown capital letters':
(i) The Holy Roman Empire persisted for almost one thousand years.
(ii) The Morning Star appeared in the sky.

(23) He was afraid that the Beard would return.

## 7. Some problems solved

The analysis of metonymy as a subtype of interpretive use solves the main problem that faced all associationist accounts. These were forced to admit arbitrary jumps from literal interpretations of metonymic utterances to assertions about various objects or individuals. That this cannot correspond to any sort of rational inferential step was shown with examples (20) and (21). In order to provide the inferential mechanism with a suitable input on which it can start applying considerations of relevance, one has to recognise the existence of the 'inverted commas' use. Interpretive uses of concepts can be in effect processed by thought (if only partially) and form part of assumption schemas: according to Sperber and Wilson (1983: 68), they play an important role in a variety of phenomena including vocabulary acquisition and lexical borrowing. Therefore, it is much more profitable to embed metonymy in a 'defective' proposition containing interpretive material than to consider it as part of a full descriptive proposition which can be deductively processed but does not yield the intended effects.

Furthermore, metonymy is not considered an isolated deviation from the linguistic norm; instead it represents a subcase of a more general human metarepresentational capacity. Interpretive uses of concepts are expected to arise naturally, without being taught or learned; this indeed captures the spontaneity in the production and comprehension of metonymy. The latter does not correspond to a rhetorical or ornamental figure but serves to satisfy needs of everyday communication (such as economy in identifying a referent).

A third advantage is that there is no need for inventories of possible metonymic relations. These can be as varied as encyclopedic relations are; the only constraint on the use of metonymy is its expected computability by the hearer. Thus it is natural for metonymy to be extremely context-dependent and idiosyncratic. Recall (11):

(11) You should avoid marrying a sheep at all costs.

There are, of course, some types of metonymy which are recurrent within a given culture or subsection of a community. These conventionalised cases of metonymy will be given fuller consideration in section 9. For the moment I want to have a look at cases in which metonymy is impossible and argue that a relevance-theoretic account can deal with them. Consider the following example:

(24) The saxophone could not come to London for the VE anniversary.

In most contexts an interpretation of (24) would be inconsistent with the principle of relevance if the metonymy was intended to refer to Bill Clinton. The hearer would reason as follows: 'The speaker must have considered the saxophone as the most relevant bit of encyclopedic information about the given individual that could be used

to identify him. Therefore one should look for someone with a highly relevant relation to a saxophone. Now the most accessible such relation is that of "saxophone player": who would it be relevant to identify as "saxophone player" in this context?'. If the speaker merely intended to refer to Clinton, she has not chosen the most economical way of doing so.[6] She has unnecessarily sent the hearer off looking for extra effects in order to offset the extra processing effort demanded by indirectness (i.e. by the metonymic description).

Another case where metonymy does not work is given in (25) (from Borkin, 1972):

(25) IBM rejoiced at its high earnings.

Again it would need quite a special context for the proper name to refer to owners of IBM stock and not to the company itself. The reason is that the descriptive content of the expression *IBM* is more accessible and can give rise to an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. An interpretation involving interpretive use would have to be caused by particular expectations of relevance. By the same token one might distinguish a preferred interpretation of a metonymy among several possibilities on the basis of avoiding unjustified processing effort. In (26) the 'staff' interpretation is less likely to be rejected than the 'stock owners' one:

(26) IBM should get together to discuss common problems.

Finally, the approach I have put forth includes no commitment to a norm of literalness or truthfulness. This has two interesting consequences for the psychology of processing. On the one hand, the search for a possible referent for the metonymic expression is seen as a local, i.e. sub-propositional, process. There is no reason to suppose that the whole of the proposition 'literally' expressed needs to be computed and then rejected in favour of an implicated one (cf. the objections of Sag, 1981: 175–176). The activation of encyclopedic assumptions together with tentative reference assignments may (and normally does) take place before the act of utterance has even been completed. On the other hand, my approach does not entail that the literal, i.e. descriptive, referent is necessarily computationally prior to the non-descriptive one. Usually, of course, the descriptive interpretation needs to be computed and ruled out, if only because it corresponds to the encoded meaning and the latter is needed as a starting point for any further processing (see Bach, 1994: 159–160).[7] However, it may well be that in specialised and highly accessible contexts (e.g. in professional talk), it is the metonymic interpretation that is accessed first. This conclusion is in accord with much current psycholinguistic literature questioning the psychological priority of literal meaning (e.g. Gibbs, 1987, 1989, and the articles by Miller, Ortony and Rumelhart in Ortony, 1979).

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[6] Of course the metonymy could be used to produce a humorous effect; I postpone the discussion of such effects till section 8.

[7] It comes as no surprise that in an experimental environment the comprehension of metonymic referential descriptions should take longer than the comprehension of literal ones (see Gibbs, 1994).

So far I have dealt with metonymy as a way of economising processing effort in securing reference: however, it may also give rise to a number of effects, to which I now turn.

## 8. Metonymy, contextual effects and attitudes

Apart from economy considerations, there are two more reasons why a speaker aiming at optimal relevance might decide to use a concept interpretively.[8] First, it may provide access to a greater range of contextual implications than its descriptive counterpart. Second, it may enable the speaker to express a variety of attitudes, ranging from complete approval to complete rejection, towards the descriptive content of the concept. Given that metonymy is a variety of interpretive use, I want to look at some of its effects on the basis of a number of examples.

Consider the following passage from a newspaper column by Erma Bombeck, where she describes her daughter's difficulties finding a suitable roommate (cited in Clark, 1983):

(27) We thought we were onto a steam iron yesterday, but we were too late. Steam irons never have any trouble finding roommates. [...] We've just had a streak of bad luck. First, our Mr. Coffee flunked out of school and went back home. When we replaced her, our electric typewriter got married and split, and we got stuck with a girl who said she was getting a leather coat, but she just said that to get the room.

This passage has humorous effects, whose main source is the use of metonymies: for instance, *steam irons* is used to refer to people who own steam irons. The full descriptive phrases would have been simpler to comprehend but could not have caused the same result. Clearly the extra processing effort incurred by the interpretive (metonymic) use is outweighed by a considerable increase in contextual effects.

In order to explain the effect of (27) we have first to reconsider the assumption that the communicator has used the most relevant stimulus she could have used to produce the effects she intended (captured by clause (b) of the presumption of optimal relevance). According to the principle of relevance, this assumption is communicated by every act of ostensive communication; indeed, I have shown how the hearer makes use of it in retrieving the intended referent of metonymic expressions. What is crucial for the present case is that this assumption is meant to acquire some relevance of its own. In other words, the speaker has intended the hearer to entertain it independently and combine it with contextual assumptions in order to produce contextual effects which would increase the overall relevance of her utterance.

[8] I have drawn on Sperber and Wilson (1983: 68), where the discussion concerns more specifically the echoic use of concepts.

For instance: If Bombeck has communicated (among other things) that the *electric typewriter* is the description most economically contributing to the relevance of her utterance, she must have assumed that the addressee has in the first place adequate means to perform reference assignment. Thus she must have supposed that he has some immediately available encyclopedic assumptions that would combine typewriters and the persons who own them. In fact, she must have assumed that in this situation the most relevant assumptions that bear on the identification of people are assumptions involving their possessions. Given that the context includes assumptions about sharing a room, i.e. about interpersonal relations, the addressee may derive a number of contextual implications concerning the materialistic and utilitarian aspects that these relations can have.

What about the humorous effect? Bombeck is a satirist and does not really endorse the implications of (27) I sketched above. What she achieves by the interpretive use of the metonymic descriptions is to implicitly convey her attitude towards their appropriateness (as well as towards whoever accepts this appropriateness; for instance, her daughter's generation). This attitude may be taken to correspond to mild disapproval and playful mockery, to which the passage owes its humorous effect. Whichever we take her precise attitude to be, the upshot is that Bombeck succeeds in implicitly conveying a range of assumptions and views by using metonymic descriptions; indeed, it is through their processing that the main relevance of her utterances is achieved.

Before I go on, I would like to draw attention to an interesting point. Among the possible interpretations of (27) there is one on which the metonymies are meant to be ironical. Relevance theory possesses the machinery to explain naturally (and uniquely) the relationship between metonymy and irony. Within the relevance-theoretic framework, irony is defined as a case of interpretive use which (a) has to remain implicit, and (b) communicates an attitude of dissociation from the interpretive material (Sperber and Wilson, 1989). Metonymy, I have argued, is also a subvariety of interpretive use. If a metonymic expression meets conditions (a) and (b), the theory predicts that it will be interpreted ironically. In (27) this possibility is present: the interpretive use is implicit, and the communicator may be taken to dissociate herself from the idea of describing one's roommates on the basis of their possessions (as well as from people accepting this idea). The ironical use of metonymies is further illustrated below:

(28) Peter finally married the free ticket to the opera. (adapted from Sperber, 1975)
(29) Here comes the fastest gun in the west. (uttered of a hopeless shooter)

In (28) the speaker is dissociating herself from the idea that the most relevant way to identify Peter's wife is her access to free tickets to the opera (probably an idea implicitly attributed to Peter himself); in (29) the speaker is expressing dissociation from the appropriateness of the metonymic description (probably endorsed by the gun fighter himself).

All the examples I have examined in this section contain metonymic uses which are intended to make manifest a wide set of weakly communicated assumptions

(*weak implicatures*, in relevance-theoretic terms; cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 198ff.). These are assumptions which are not always manifestly fully backed by the speaker herself. The more creative a metonymy is, the more open-ended the set of weak implicatures of the utterance – with the upper limit provided, of course, by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. To the extent that utterances such as (27)–(29) achieve most of their relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures, they are said to create *poetic effects* (ibid.: 222).

Note that poetic effects include not only cognitive but also affective aspects. In other words, the communication of feelings or impressions is analysable in terms of the weak communication of a range of propositions – exactly on a par with any weakly conveyed modifications of the hearer's cognitive environment, i.e. standard weak implicatures (see Sperber and Wilson, 1989). Thus in the case of the ironical metonymic uses of (27)–(29), the communication of the speaker's dissociative attitude is captured within the overall set of assumptions weakly communicated.

Apart from dissociation, metonymic uses can communicate a variety of emotions or impressions, as shown in the following examples:

(30) My own blood can't do that to me.
(31) Capital has learned to sit down and talk with labour.
(32) You can't read the history of the United States, my friends, without learning the great story of those thousands of unnamed women. And if it's ever told straight, you'll know it's the sunbonnet and not the sombrero that has settled the country. ((31) and (32) cited in Corbett, 1971)

In (30) the use of the metonymy gives access to assumptions involving the importance of blood relations, which are generally supposed to provide lifetime companionship and support. In (31) *capital* and *labour* are meant to activate assumptions about people and their relation to financial power. In (32) *the sunbonnet* and *the sombrero* make manifest a range of stereotypical assumptions concerning femininity and delicacy on the one hand, and masculinity and dynamism on the other. These assumptions are in each case combined with the propositional content of the utterance and further contextual assumptions, and yield a wide array of weak implicatures that could not be communicated by a literal paraphrase. In all examples the aim of the speaker is to create affective rather than cognitive mutuality, and to produce common impressions rather than common knowledge (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 224).

Let me just mention a final case where the affective effects of metonymy may contribute greatly to the relevance of an utterance. It involves referential shorthands which acquire implications of closeness and 'belonging', especially when used within professional and other 'in-groups' (see Gibbs, 1989):

(33) The coach has put his best bat in the field.
(34) The meal was excellent; of course, we ate Paul Bocuse. (adapted from Ruwet, 1975)

The implications arise from the assumption that a rational speaker aiming at optimal relevance must have taken into account what the hearer is capable of recovering; therefore, she must have assumed that she shares with him some mutually manifest assumptions, which may act as premises in the retrieval of the intended interpretation of the metonymy. The assumption that the interlocutors share this background information then acquires some relevance of its own. In (34), for instance, the mutually manifest assumption that it is mutually manifest to both speaker and hearer that (a) Bocuse is a high-quality chef, and (b) (a) is a relatively unknown piece of encyclopedic information, creates implications of common sophistication and social expertise.

In this section I have shown how a relevance-theoretic approach can naturally explain a number of effects caused by metonymic expressions. The outcome of the discussion seems to support my initial claim that (creative) metonymy is a variety of the interpretive use of language. In the final section of this paper I would like to adduce some additional support for the relevance-theoretic proposal and to present some of its consequences.

## 9. Implications of the present account

I will briefly sketch the implications of the proposed analysis in two areas: the relationship between metonymy and metaphor, and the conventionalisation of metonymic uses.

### *9.1. Metonymy and metaphor*

If an account along the lines of interpretive use and dubbing can explain the referential uses of metonymy, it can arguably be generalised to capture referential uses of metaphor as well. I am going to argue in favour of this proposal and demonstrate how it can complement the existing relevance-theoretic account of metaphor.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986: 231ff.), by uttering a metaphor the speaker intends to communicate a complex thought. Instead of trying to convey it literally, thus causing the hearer (and herself) increased processing effort, she chooses to communicate a more easily expressed assumption, which shares with the thought some logical and contextual implications. The exact subset of implications of the utterance that will be taken to be shared by the speaker's thought – and consequently to be intended – is yielded each time by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. Metaphor is thus considered to be a subvariety of loose use of language, where what matters is not the truthfulness/literalness of a proposition but its degree of faithfulness to the content of a thought.

The above account correctly captures the richness and indeterminacy of the implications of the metaphor; it bypasses, however, a couple of issues that bear more specifically on referential metaphors. Consider (35):

(35) My tender rosebud left me. (from Morgan, 1979)

Suppose that the description *my tender rosebud* is used to refer to the speaker's wife, Gilda Clark. In order to arrive at the proposition expressed by the utterance the hearer has to assign reference to the metaphoric referring expression. The problem is that this cannot be done unless the implications of (35) have been retrieved, since it is on the basis of these that the hearer will understand what the speaker intended to convey through the metaphor. Moreover, according to relevance theory, the propositional form of a 'figurative' utterance is not an explicature, i.e. it is not communicated. This makes it impossible to capture the fact that (35), according to the intuitions of most hearers, communicates among other things (36):

(36) Gilda Clark has left the speaker.

Let me start with the second problem. If we decide to preserve our pretheoretic intuitions in determining 'what was said' by (35) – cf. Recanati's Availability Principle – we should assume that reference assignment for metaphor contributes to the explicature of the utterance. In this way figurative and non-figurative referring expressions will receive a unified treatment. Their only difference will be in the means they provide for securing reference: metaphoric referring expressions involve an element of indirectness which causes additional processing effort and is therefore expected to be offset by extra or different contextual effects.

How can metaphoric reference be dealt with on the explicature level? The question may receive a natural answer based on the insights from metonymic reference. I suggest that metaphoric reference is also a variety of interpretive use and naming. The first stage towards retrieving the propositional form of (35) is retrieving the interpretive use in a way parallel to (19):

(37) The person that the speaker could appropriately call 'his tender rosebud' left him.

In order to complete this representation with an individuating conceptual representation, the hearer starts looking around in his encyclopedic knowledge for possible referents. He realises that the complex concept TENDER ROSEBUD is meant to yield access to stereotypical assumptions concerning female sweetness or beauty; in other words, it is used loosely to refer to a woman. This assumption is combined with other mutually manifest assumptions concerning the speaker's wife so that the hearer arrives finally at the hypothesis that she is the intended referent of the description – cf. (36). If this hypothesis is consistent with the principle of relevance, it is accepted as the intended interpretation.

On this analysis, (36) comes as an enrichment of the very general proposition in (37). What is crucial in this enrichment process is that the concept TENDER ROSEBUD is used interpretively to yield easy access to another concept which resembles it – here, the concept of an individual. The two conceptual representations resemble each other, in the sense that they share a number of encyclopedic assumptions: the precise degree of resemblance between them is constrained by the presumption that the

speaker is aiming at optimal relevance. In the case of (35), these shared assumptions give rise to a number of weak implicatures:

(38) Gilda Clark is beautiful.
(39) Gilde Clark is delicate.
(40) Gilda Clark is something rare and precious, etc.

These, together with the propositional content of (35) and other assumptions made available by the encyclopedic entries of the activated concepts, yield more weak implicatures of the type in (41):

(41) The speaker is miserable because Gilda Clark left him.

Metaphoric reference is thus similar to metonymic reference in at least the following respects: (a) the concept communicated by a metaphoric expression is different from the concept encoded by that expression; (b) the metaphoric expression functions interpretively as a newly coined name for the referent of that concept, which can be understood on the presumption that the speaker has aimed at optimal relevance; (c) the assignment of reference for the metaphoric expression contributes to the explicature of the utterance; (d) the more creative cases aim at making mutually manifest to the interlocutors a great number of weakly communicated assumptions, and thereby create poetic effects.

The two types of reference differ crucially, however, in the way the interpretively used expression is processed. In metonymy, the interpretive expression is meant to yield the concept for an object or an individual through some particularly accessible value included in their encyclopedic entry. The way the referent is retrieved is guided by the presumption that the interpretively used concept was the most relevant stimulus the speaker could have used for the identification of the referent. There is no resemblance between the concept used as such and the concept of the intended referent. In metaphor, reference assignment is performed on the basis of the resemblance of the interpretively used concept and the concept of the intended referent. The retrieval of the referent flows directly from the search for a concept of an individual/object which resembles the concept used in the metaphoric utterance.

Let me finally examine what happens when metonymy and metaphor are used in predicate positions. Consider again the following examples:

(14) a. Maria is a divine voice.
b. Maria is a nightingale.

What differentiates such uses from the referential uses I have looked at so far is the fact that no single individuating concept need be accessed and predicated of Maria. The aim of predication is for the speaker to ascribe a bunch of properties to Maria, which will take the form of an array of weak implicatures. Therefore, the hearer does not have to assume that dubbing has occurred, but he may directly retrieve a number of implicatures based on highly accessible stereotypical assumption schemas con-

cerning divine voices or nightingales. In the above examples the set of implicatures more or less coincides and includes:

(42) Maria sings beautifully.
(43) Maria sings in an unusually moving way.
(44) Maria's singing can cause intense feelings, etc.

Note that, on this account, predicative uses of metonymy are understood as metaphors. That is, unlike referential cases, no intermediate proposition of the sort in (45) need be accessed by the hearer for the comprehension of (14a):

(45) Maria is someone that could appropriately be called 'a divine voice'.

Recall that example (12) given by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) was also impossible to interpret as a metonymy:

(12) It's been Grand Central Station here all day.

Dubbing will only be needed in cases of equative sentences of the type in (46); here both 'Maria' and 'the divine voice' are used referentially and their positions are interchangeable:

(46) Maria is the divine voice.

### 9.2. *The conventionalisation of metonymy*

So far I have concentrated on creative uses of metonymy. In this section I want to claim that such uses form one end of a continuum of phenomena which have been classified under 'metonymy' in the literature; the continuum also includes conventionalised metonymies generated by generalised pragmatic routines and semanticised metonymies that have been registered in the lexicon. The main aim of my discussion will be to show how the interpretive nature of creative metonymies explains some aspects of this continuum.

Let me start with the fully semanticised cases. It is an entirely uncontroversial claim that metonymy may result in semantic change (see Ullmann, 1962: 218). The relevant phenomenon is traditionally called 'catachresis': that is, use of an inappropriate term in order to fill a vocabulary gap. Good examples are provided by the french words *bureau* ('cloth covering a piece of furniture' → 'desk' → 'work place/business including a number of desks' → 'group running a business' – which in sessions meets round a writing table, etc.; cf. Le Guern, 1973: 93), and *grève* ('bank of Seine' → 'spot on Seine's bank where unemployed workers met' → 'act of stopping work' – strike; cf. Henry, 1971: 20). Semanticised metonymies in English include *sponge, iron, orange, tongue*, etc. (cf. Ruhl, 1989: 97).

Metonymic semantic change flows directly from (i) the general phenomenon of semantic change caused by the interpretive use of concepts (see Sperber and Wilson, 1983: 69–70), and (ii) the naming function of novel metonymies. After being extensively used, a metonymic expression that has originated as a product of successful naming may begin to lose its former descriptive content; consequently it can gradually accept as its new descriptive content the referential content it has when used interpretively. What the speakers initially did not endorse as a truthful description of a referent becomes the proper descriptive meaning of the expression and is registered in the lexicon. The empirical consequence of this is an increase in the accessibility of the referent, since the latter does not have to be computed any more but merely retrieved from memory; the motivation of the whole phenomenon lies in referential cost-efficiency. The derivational link can still be intuitively felt but it is as weak as that of dead metaphors: in both cases, immediate and standard effects are yielded by minimised processing effort.[9]

The intermediate cases in the continuum of metonymy allow for various degrees of conventionalisation. For instance, metonymies used in a standardised way in professional and other groups may be dealt with in terms of generalised pragmatic routines; these operate on the basis of mutually manifest assumptions that are recurrently used for identification purposes (cf. the 'ham sandwich' case). Other metonymies have greater productivity ranging over large classes of the vocabulary. A classic example is the 'author for work' metonymy, whose conventionalisation can be checked by a number of tests (see Fauconnier, 1985). Compare the pairs:

(47) a. Proust is a great author. He is on the top shelf.
b. The ham sandwich was stale. *It left without paying.
(48) a. Proust, who is on the top shelf, was a great man.
b. *The ham sandwich, which left without paying, was stale.

I cannot elaborate further here. I hope that it has become clear that metonymy is not a natural class, at least as far as its comprehension is concerned. It rather represents a continuum of cases according to the degree in which the accessibility of the descriptive content has been retained.[10]

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a relevance-theoretic treatment of metonymy. I gave some arguments for treating it as a variety of interpretive use and in particular

[9] Norrick (1981) suggests that this sort of etymological information can be stated as a redundancy rule in the lexical entry for the expression.

[10] This account is supported by independent findings, such as Clark and Clark's (1979) research on denominal verbs. The latter range from one-off uses ('I porched the newspaper') to cases that have entered the lexicon ('I hoovered my room'), forming a continuum parallel to the metonymies I examine. Arguably denominal verbs also belong to the interpretive use of language.

an instance of name introduction. Although the present account needs a lot more fleshing out, I believe it fares better than previous approaches which allowed a central place to associationism. Moreover, it provides a psychologically plausible grounding for the phenomena noticed by classical rhetoric by subsuming metonymy under interpretive use and the metarepresentational function of language in general. In this way, metonymy belongs together with other so-called 'figures of speech' that have received a more natural analysis within relevance theory.

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