Metarepresentation and Non-Literal Language Use

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ABSTRACTS (in order of presentation)

GREGORY CURRIE
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Orienting Narration to Another’s Point of View

I examine a kind of metarepresentation which occurs in certain language-based narratives. This involves what I call character-focused narration. This is a kind of narration in which the narrator while not (pace Genette and others) narrating from the point of view of a character, orients the narration to that point of view by using any of a range of imitative devices which serve to express aspects of that character’s point of view.

The argument here depends on a possibly controversial account of what it is to have a point of view, which I defend against the charge that it is excessively inclusive. In the process I reject accounts of point of view which focus excessively on what the character sees or knows. I suggest that the effect of narration oriented to a point of view is to create a relation of “resonance” between the reader and the character whose point of view is in question. I review some recent empirical evidence which suggests a story about the mechanisms underlying the success of these imitative methods, and the ease with which these resonance relations are established. I consider the relations between imitation, pretence, and Sperber and Wilson’s concept of the echoic use of language. I conclude with a budget of illustrations from literary narratives of the kinds of imitative effects achieved by free indirect discourse and other styles of metarepresentation.

Example: First paragraph from Henry James The Ambassadors

Strether’s first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted. A telegram from him bespeaking a room “only if not noisy,” reply paid, was produced for the enquirer at the office, so that the understanding they should meet at Chester rather than at Liverpool remained to that extent sound. The same secret principle, however, that had prompted Strether not absolutely to desire Waymarsh's presence at the dock, that had led him thus to postpone for a few hours his enjoyment of it, now operated to make him feel he could still wait without disappointment. They would dine together at the worst, and, with all respect to dear old Waymarsh--if not even, for that matter, to himself--there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other. The principle I have just mentioned as operating had been, with the most newly disembarked of the two men, wholly instinctive--the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade's face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for this countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first "note," of Europe. Mixed with everything was the apprehension, already, on Strether’s part, that it would, at best, throughout, prove the note of Europe in quite a sufficient degree.
ROBYN CARSTON
Psychology and Language Sciences, UCL
CSMN, University of Oslo

Metaphor, Simile and Metarepresentation

The relevance-theoretic view of metaphorical language as a kind of loose use situates it within a general account of the pragmatic adjustment of word meanings in context. These on-line meaning-modulation processes result in ad hoc concepts whose denotations are narrower or broader than those of the linguistically-encoded concepts they are derived from. Similes, on the other hand, do not undergo the kind of radical concept broadening that is claimed for their corresponding metaphors but maintain their literal meaning. On this kind of account, there seems to be no particular reason to suppose that either simile or metaphor require any greater degree of metarepresentation than other literal or loose uses of language.

I will suggest that, although the ‘deflationary’ ad hoc concept account of metaphor works well for the majority of quick-fire, often somewhat conventionalised, conversational uses of metaphor, it may be less adequate for more creative metaphors or those which are sustained and developed beyond a single utterance/thought. In such cases, it seems that the literal meaning of the metaphorical vehicle is retained and metarepresented as a whole for further, more reflective, processing. Moreover, there seems to be little, if any, difference in the way in which metaphors and similes are processed and understood in these extended, putatively metarepresentational, cases.

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NAUSICAA POUSCOULOUS
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Max Planck Institute, Leipzig

Metaphor: For Adults Only?

Many – indeed most – experimental studies from the 1970–80s show that children do not understand metaphors until fairly late in development (even quite late into adolescence, according to some). I will argue that maybe children’s metaphorical abilities are not as bad as they appear at first. Findings concerning the comprehension of metaphor by young children might be better explained by other factors, rather than poor pragmatic abilities. Furthermore, attested cases of metaphor production by children have often been re-analysed either as cases of overextension or as cases of pretence and are, thus, not considered to be genuine metaphors. I would like to explore the hypothesis that such re-analyses do not preclude the possibility that young children possess the necessary abilities to produce metaphors.

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CATHERINE WEARING  
Philosophy, Wellesley College, Massachusetts  

Pretence, Pragmatics, Idiom and Metaphor  

Imaginative and creative capacities would seem to be at the heart of both games of make-believe and figurative uses of language. But what is the relation between figurative uses of language and make-believe? In particular, how exactly might cases of metaphor or idiom involve make-believe? In this presentation, I take up the answers to this question developed by Walton (1990, 1993, 2000), Hills (1997), and Egan (2008). I consider a number of possible challenges to the pretence account – first of idiom, then of metaphor – in order to pin down the precise sense in which make-believe is claimed to be involved in these uses of language. It turns out that there are two distinct ways in which pretence functions within these accounts: as an activity and as a structural relationship. However, neither plays a fully satisfactory role in accounting for either idiom or metaphor.

PAULA RUBIO-FERNÁNDEZ  
Psychology & Language Sciences, UCL  

A Third Theory of Pretense  

The debate around the nature of pretense has been traditionally polarized between mentalistic and behavioral approaches. In this talk I will defend a third position, the Intentional theory of early pretense put forward by Rakoczy, Tomasello and colleagues. Contrary to the view that the Intentional theory suffers from the same limitations as the Behavioral theory, I argue that in fact it offers a more satisfactory analysis of early pretense than the Metarepresentational theory. Crucially, it better integrates young children’s understanding of other people’s mental states and actions. A new intentional account of sound effects pretense is proposed, which replaces the standard analysis and therefore complements the current Intentional theory.

SAM GLUCKSBERG  
Psychology, Princeton University  

Moral and Media Hazards: How Metaphors Shape Thought, Affect and Action  

Language can have powerful effects on judgment, decision making, reasoning and perception. I review the principles of human cognition and perception that mediate the effects of language -- particularly metaphorical language -- in the contexts of economics and social policy. I analyze how figurative language, from euphemisms to analogies and metaphors, is used in the media. The unintended consequences of choosing one metaphor rather than another constitute a media hazard: systematic biasing of financial expectations and investor decision making.
Irony and Metarepresentation

In this paper, I consider how two recent accounts of verbal irony – the pretence account and the echoic account – might explain a range of data reported in the literature on the nature of irony and the differences between irony and metaphor. In the first part, I argue that while both the echoic account and attributive versions of the pretence account (i.e. those that share with the echoic account the assumption that the ironical speaker is expressing a characteristic attitude to an attributed utterance or thought) can offer similar explanations of the data, the main explanatory burden in all but a subclass of ‘parodic’ cases is carried by the attributive element and not the element of pretence. Hence, irony necessarily involves attribution and does not necessarily involve pretence.

In the second part, I consider what light attributive accounts of irony can shed on the fact that irony comprehension appears to correlate with success in second-order false-belief tests, while metaphor comprehension does not. I suggest three possible lines of explanation for the extra layer of metarepresentational ability required, one of which fits well with the generally accepted mindreading account of standard first-order false-belief tests, while the others fit well with the more recent epistemic account proposed by Sperber and Mascaro (2007, forthcoming). After outlining some possible ways of testing these alternative explanations, I argue that while irony does indeed require a higher order of mindreading ability than metaphor, the data on irony comprehension tend to support the claim that irony also involves a crucial epistemic element.

KENDALL WALTON
Philosophy, University of Michigan

Over- and Understatement Compared—Are They Forms of Irony?

It is tempting to suppose that overstatement and understatement, hyperbole and meiosis, are analogous figures of speech, differing only in whether the speaker represents a quantity as larger, or as smaller, than she means to claim that it is. Things get messy, however, when we notice that to overstate how large or expensive or distant something is, is to understate how small or inexpensive or close it is, and vice versa. Nevertheless, traditionally recognized, paradigmatic examples of over- and understatement seem to function very differently in everyday conversation.

I propose an account of the two figures which counts some utterances, in their conversational contexts, as overstatements of a quantity but not understatements of the opposite quantity, and other utterances as understatements only. This account shows why understatement is closely related to irony (as many have noticed), and explains why ironical understatement is so common. It also helps to explain what irony in general is and how it works. Overstatement, however, turns out to be an entirely different kettle of fish.
Understanding of Non-Literal Language in Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are characterised by a universal and persistent impairment in communication. The standard explicative model of the disorder accounts for this communicative impairment by positing a primary deficit in metarepresentational abilities. This view has been backed by a number of studies demonstrating that metarepresentational skills indeed correlate with the ability to understand non-literal language. In this work, we apply this finding to assess how participants with an ASD use prosodic cues to retrieve the speaker’s meaning. In particular, we concentrate on the understanding of echoic utterances (ironical utterances, echoic questions, metalinguistic negations, etc.) in which the form of the utterance is merely used to mention the content of an attributed thought or utterance, and the speaker’s tone of voice indicates the speaker’s actual attitude towards that content. In these cases, two orders of metarepresentations are required to access the speaker’s meaning which should be especially challenging for individuals with an ASD. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, ASD participants appeared to process such utterances very much like the controls across a range of tasks. We discuss the relevance of these findings for the standard view of ASDs and for pragmatic theories.

ELISABETH CAMP
Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania

Sarcasm, Pretending, and Saying

Two leading theories of irony hold that irony involves presenting an utterance without illocutionary commitment; instead, a speaker merely pretends to make that utterance, or echoes another possible or past utterance, in order to express a certain attitude. Focusing on what I take to be the simpler case of sarcasm, I argue that while pretense and expression do play an important role, they cannot tell the whole story because some sarcastic utterances do put forward contents with definite illocutionary force. Indeed, certain varieties of sarcasm have demonstrably syntactic effects, suggesting that at least in those cases the sarcastic meaning plays a semantic role. We need an account which encompasses the full range of behavior that sarcasm can manifest.

HERB CLARK
Psychology, Stanford University

Depiction as a basic method of communication

In everyday conversation, we rely on three cognitively distinct methods of communicative action: description (as with the conventional forms of language); indication (as with pointing); and depiction (as with iconic gestures). Ordinarily, we combine these methods in composite
actions, as when I point at a nearby car and say “That’s mine,” using both description and indication. Depiction, however, has been largely ignored in the study of language use. When recognized at all, it has been treated as marginal or irrelevant to theories of communication. I will argue that depiction is anything but marginal or irrelevant. Indeed, it is the very basis for many types of meta-representation and non-literal uses of language.

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