Text-linguistic comments on metaphor identification

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INVITED COMMENTS

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It seems to me very important that proponents of psychological approaches to and theories of metaphor should turn their attention to real textual and discoursal data. Equally important is that linguistic approaches to and theories of metaphor should be tested against the psychological realities of text processing. To the extent that the metaphor identification project bridges this gap it is to be welcomed. However, since the phenomenon of metaphor is complex and somewhat intractable, it seems doubtful that there can be any quick fixes by which long sections of literary texts can be rapidly and reliably coded for their metaphorical potential.

Any method for coding or tagging of potential metaphors has of course to take into account the purpose of such coding. The writers of the articles in this issue talk sometimes about the goal as 'the exact description and measurement or quantification of metaphor in discourse' (Crisp et al., 2002: 65). But other participants in the project seem a little unsure about the extent to which various metaphorical features are to be coded, and this, one supposes, could be because the kind of research for which the coding is to be used is at present less than clear.

> Do we add codings to capture such relations so that they can be examined later to see whether the phenomenon occurs more generally (and, if so, in what forms and with what effects) across a range of texts and text-types? We would argue that, if possible, we should add such codings. But, depending upon the extent of the features to code, this desire may become impractical.
>
> (Heywood et al., 2002: 49)

A clear indication of the kind of research which might be facilitated by the kind of analysis here proposed comes from Crisp (2002):

> Its aim is to give an analysis of the conceptual content of a text which will allow psychologists to put aside its surface linguistic detail while formulating and testing hypotheses about such things as text-reading times and text recalls.
>
> (Crisp, 2002: 11)

But it is not obvious that Crisp's view and Heywood et al.'s view of the uses to which the identification instrument will be put are very similar.

The last quotation seems to represent the consensus among most of these articles that the surface linguistic detail of the text makes no important difference to psychological processing. This I doubt. For example, in discussing sentence 3 of *Three Times Table* Heywood et al. indicate a wish to count 'zeal' and 'faith' (which occurs in sentence 2) as metaphorical, since they apply words from the domain of religion to that of politics. I would suggest that the fact that 'faith'

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(sentence 2), which is more obviously a religious word, precedes 'zeal' (sentence 3), which is less specifically religious, somehow primes us to interpret 'zeal' as from the religious domain and therefore metaphorical. As the author of a work on metaphor that stresses the syntactic varieties of metaphorical expression ('the surface linguistic detail', Goatly, 1997 chs. 6–9) it might seem natural for me to be suspicious of an approach which makes a virtue of ignoring it. But there is a larger picture here. Besides suggesting a surface structure–deep structure dichotomy, the approach belongs to a tradition which sees linguistic communication as largely a matter of ideational or conceptual meaning, rather than, as with the systemic functional tradition, also interpersonal or, more importantly in this case, textual (Halliday, 1994: Chs 2 and 3). The ordering and distribution of information within the clause and across larger texts units, apparent in its 'surface linguistic detail', has to be taken into account in any principled investigation of how metaphors may be identified and processed in texts. Indeed, Lakoff's theory is not one which was devised with text analysis in mind, in any case.

Following Cameron (1999) the researchers in this project try to maintain a distinction between process metaphors and linguistic metaphors. Linguistic metaphors are those which, through work within the theory level, are identified as having metaphoric potential. Process metaphors are those which are processed metaphorically by a discourse participant on a particular occasion (Cameron, 1999: 6; Heywood et al., 2002). The work in these articles claims to be concerned with 'linguistic metaphors':

> When identifying a metaphor as a metaphor, the question is whether it is possible at all to construct a nonliteral comparison statement, analogy and mapping between two domains conceptualized as two different domains. If it is, then the expression ought to be included as metaphorical
>
> (Steen, 2002: 25)

There are two problems with this distinction. First, the only way in which the researchers can tell whether a stretch of text potentially cues a metaphor is by trying to process it as such. The reason for this is that any stretch of text is potentially metaphorical – the second problem. The injunction to 'keep all potential cases on board' (Crisp, 2002; Steen, 2002) might be self-defeating. Gone are the days when metaphor was theorized as a semantic phenomenon, i.e. when the semantics of the text signal metaphorical potential through semantic deviance such as selection restriction violations. Levin himself, who in *The Semantics of Metaphor* (1977) gave one of the most detailed accounts within this tradition, suggested at the time that metaphor needs a pragmatic account. Any semantic deviance in a text which occurs as the result of the use of metaphor is a by-product of unconventional reference. Indeed, the researchers on this project point out that they see metaphor as a referential phenomenon. 'As propositions designate mental representations of projected states of affairs that have been expressed linguistically, the approach reflects a referential view of metaphor' (Steen, 2002: 22). Heywood et al., in particular, struggle with the distinction and

actually invoke the notion of *processing* when trying to establish which are the linguistic metaphors. When discussing whether 'faith' and 'zeal' should be counted as linguistic metaphors they state: 'In terms of processing, it is therefore plausible that the domain of religion is activated in readers' minds' (Heywood et al., 2002: 40).

A way out of this dilemma might actually be to use concordance data as corroboration of intuitions about the most common domain of use of items such as 'zeal'. *The Bank of English* would give countable examples of use and one could perhaps calculate the percentage of uses in a religious domain – this would not, of course, give the all-or-nothing decision desired but rather a gradient of probabilities of metaphorical interpretation (see, for example, Sinclair, 1991: Ch. 4).

But probabilities are often the best we can hope for. Linguistic metaphors are best seen as a pragmatic phenomenon, a question of reference assignment (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). As a result their identification and interpretation will depend on less-than-certain inferential processes, rather than on the hard and fast rules of semantics (Leech, 1983: 21–4). It is, then, perhaps unfortunate that the pilot studies for metaphorical identification and codification addressed themselves to literary texts, which by their nature are uncertain and open-ended in interpretation. Within such texts metaphorical identification will likely be more complicated than in, for example, texts from works of popular science or newspapers (Goatly, 1997: 216–19).

Another reason for avoiding highly sophisticated literary texts with their original and self-conscious metaphors, such as the Rushdie passage, might be that the theory on which the research is based was developed with conventional metaphors in mind. Although Lakoff and Turner (1989) made a diversion into applying the theory to poetry in *More Than Cool Reason*, the foundation of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument is that quite normal everyday uses of language are full of unconsciously used metaphors, structuring our abstract thinking on the basis of our physical experience as infants. These metaphors will be what I call 'inactive' and will be processed and recognized much more simply than original sophisticated literary metaphors, because they give rise to a secondary lexicalized meaning, which can be found in the dictionary.

For Lakoff and Johnson and their followers, using metaphorical evidence to support the experiential hypothesis (Lakoff, 1987: 164), the prototypical metaphor will be one in which the topic/target is abstract and the vehicle/source is concrete. The two domains will be quite distinct and distant from each other. Following their theory, the definition of metaphor adopted in this issue is that of a conceptual mapping between two domains (Steen, 2002). This definition will not be problematic as far as cognitive conceptual metaphors are concerned but may throw up problems in the case of literary discourse. 'The decision about the identity or difference between two domains is the most fundamental problem for every metaphor identification procedure' (Steen, 2002: 25). There is some agonizing in the articles in this issue over whether a particular expression refers

within one domain or refers across distinct domains, and therefore whether it counts as potential metaphor or not, or as synecdoche rather than metaphor (e.g. various instances in Heywood et al.). I have argued elsewhere that particularly striking metaphors can be found in cases where the domains are close if not identical, the paradoxical 'the child is father of the man' or the approximative 'my mother was as near a whore as makes no matter' (Goatly, 1997: 40, 18). These may be extreme cases, the second bordering on the literal. In between these and abstract domain–concrete domain metaphors are those where the domains are both concrete, and give rise to image–image metaphors, and these are particularly common in literature, though perhaps excluded from the count here (Crisp, 2002).

Lakoff and Johnson, and psycholinguists working within their tradition, sometimes lack awareness of alternative theoretical approaches to metaphor. They encourage themselves to do this, of course, by announcements that this is '*The* Contemporary Theory of Metaphor', as Lakoff entitled his contribution to Ortony's second edition of *Metaphor and Thought* (1993). One theorist who has been much ignored and whom I have found helpful is J.J.A. Mooij (1976). He introduced me to the idea that metaphoricity can operate to varying degrees. Following him I have proposed that there are clines of (1) distance/approximation, (2) conventionality, (3) marking, (4) explicitness and (5) contradictoriness (Goatly, 1997: 38, 317). I think the research into metaphorical interpretation must take into account at least the first three or four of these. The problem in identification will then be to decide where on the scale the cut-off point will be. Let's consider some of these clines.

(1) I have already indicated that the definition of metaphor depends upon the distance between topic and vehicle domains, and how this might exclude potential metaphors. (2) I have also touched on the question of conventionality, pointing out the predilection in cognitive theory for inactive or conventional metaphors. The fact that inactive metaphors can be found in the dictionary, and are lexicalized through word-formation processes, is indeed recognized as a problem for identification by some of the researchers (Heywood et al., 2002). Is *ravenous* a metaphorical expression? (3) Furthermore, the extent to which metaphors are overtly marked or signalled in discourse would, I think, be a useful strand of research since these markers give textual evidence for metaphorical potential. (4) Explicit guides to interpretation are also textual evidence that metaphors are intended by a writer (whether they are taken up or not by the processor) and so the varieties of ways in which topics and grounds are made explicit could also be taken into account in this research exercise. If we are looking for linguistic metaphors as opposed to process metaphors then presumably linguistically marked and textually specified metaphors would be a good place to start. However, again, my own preliminary research (Goatly, 1997: 311–18) suggests that markers of metaphors and explicit interpretative guidance are not employed in literary texts as much as they are in newspapers or popular science.

For anyone interested in metaphor, following others' attempts to identify and codify metaphors in real texts (rather than intuited texts) is always fascinating.

Especially impressive are Heywood et al.'s analysis of sentence 6 of the Maitland passage and 2 and 3 of the Rushdie, Steen's analysis of line 3 of the Browning poem, and the use to which Crisp et al. put their taxonomy (2002: section 6). However, I think the research project needs a more comprehensive theory, including a more critical approach to the Lakoffian framework on which it is founded.

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Cognitive-linguistic comments on metaphor identification

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In my comments I will limit myself to the examination of the relationship between the approach to metaphor as described in the four articles in the present