

## STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES IN DECODING METAPHORS

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**Summary :** Different types of metaphors involve different means of decoding, yet they are claimed to have something in common. Four types of metaphors are dealt with here: Cognitive metaphors, conventional idiomatic metaphors, poetic creative metaphors, and scientific metaphors. It is claimed that all four types show a certain tension between components on the surface level of their distant original semantic fields. Although there are differences in the freedom of creating different sorts of metaphors and in the relative difficulty of decoding them, a general device is suggested here as means of interpretation. It is claimed that even the most bizarre poetic metaphors can be interpreted by ASCENDING THE SCALE OF ABSTRACTION, and reaching a logical common level on which the words match. Metaphors display the twofold nature of language: its richness and flexibility as well as its being logically structured.

**Keywords :** Semantics; Logic and language; Metaphor ;; Abstraction

### 1. DIFFICULTIES AND DISPUTE IN SORTING METAPHORS

Different types of metaphors demand different modes of interpretation. Decoding them involves some kind of structured rule-governed process. The question is how are such rules to be specified, and how can they be recognized? The aim of this paper is to suggest possible strategies for uncovering such rules, to justify them and to show their application in decoding various types of metaphorical expression. The study looks for a unified theory of metaphorical decoding based on structuring devices which exist in all kinds of linguistic discourse.

The first step towards answering our question about strategies and rules of decoding, is to sort different types of metaphor on the assumption that their differences call for different decoding strategies. However, sorting metaphors is not a simple task since sometimes the borderlines between the different types are not absolutely sharp and well defined, and since various theoretical frameworks tend to divide the material in different ways according to their points of view.

Without any obligation to sharp dividing lines, four main types of metaphors can be recognized: 1) cognitive metaphors ; 2) culture specific and idiomatic metaphors; 3) scientific metaphors; and 4) poetic metaphors.

Cognitive metaphors are part of the human effort to encode and store empirical data and experiences in the most efficient and parsimonious way. Such metaphors are built into the cognitive structure of the mind as a part of the conceptual system. They tend to be universal and hence are sometimes overlooked as metaphors because of their high degree of acceptance and lexicalization. Jackendoff and Aron (1991) tend to exclude some of Lakoff and Turner's (1989) metaphorical patterns from the linguistic and philosophical study of metaphor for the very reason that they are cognitively indispensable. The latter argue that without such cognitive patterns as "MORE IS UP" or "GOALS ARE DESTINATIONS" there is no understanding of reality and no proper functioning in it. Being imposed on our conceptual tools, they have a unique cognitive status especially when compared to poetic metaphors where almost everything is open to the creative imagination. However Jackendoff himself includes several such cognitive metaphors in his detailed theory of conceptual semantic (Jackendoff, 1983) . The uses of "keep" in "keep the change" as well as in "keep going" or "keep from doing", or the affinities between the physical, the mental and the social vocabulary as expressed in his hypothesis of thematic relations which cross different semantic fields, illustrate these kind cognitive metaphoric usage (ibid., chap, 10). The same basic conceptual status can be assigned to the metaphorical parallelism shown in many languages' modal lexicon. Words such as "might" and "can" display a constant parallelism between the realm of forces and actual "de re" causes and the realm of epistemology and "de dicto" probability calculating, as suggested by Sweetser (1990). It is not easy to label some of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphors. They too strive at a theory of mapping different structured meaning domains into other meaning domains. Such are the generic metaphorical patterns of LOVE IS A JOURNEY, or TIME IS A RESOURCE. One may wonder about the universality of such generic level metaphor-patterns. The patterns GOALS ARE DESTINATIONS, or THE MIND IS A CONTAINER seem more universally accepted and more deeply rooted in general human experience and the way it is reflected in linguistic usage. We have here the question of how general the suggested metaphorical conceptual patterns are. And we notice even from the few examples given that they differ in their degree of abstractness and generality.

It is of course well known that some of the cultural metaphorical patterns are developed through time, are based on the common historical experience of the language speakers and are supported by coined linguistic expressions unique to each culture. This second type of metaphors are culture- pendant metaphors or language specific metaphors. Sometimes such modes of speech are borrowed and translated and perhaps slightly modified from one culture to another through the translation of canonical texts and by cultural contact. Such an example is the expression "scapegoat". English speakers may understand its negative, excluding,

meaning without knowing the old Hebrew biblical story about one of two goats chosen by lottery to be cast from a cliff in the Judean desert as a symbolic carrier of the community's sins. Many language specific idioms belong to this type of metaphor. A new learner of a language or even a child acquiring his mother tongue where this mode of speech is used will infer its use and hence part of its meaning from negative clues in the context. The original complex story may be ignored and forgotten. Only the 'picking' element and the negative sense are preserved in the colloquial usage of the term 'scapegoat' in a classroom or family context where one member is considered to be a victim. 'Victim' itself is also a well entrenched linguistic metaphor, following the same lines of secularization of religious notions and incorporating them as lexicalized terms in everyday usage. General cognitive as well as cultural and linguistic idiomatic metaphors, that sometimes in effect follow the lines of cognitive structures, are automatically understood since they are well known to the community of speakers and shared through frequent encounters in texts or in speech. Being entrenched in linguistic habits they pose no difficulty to the reader and hearer, and are easily recognized and interpreted notwithstanding their possible inner complexity.

Scientific metaphors form a unique class. These are man-made, elaborated, somewhat artificial devices, but they too show the need to map new areas of experience through the use of analogous known concepts from well understood and more structured domains. Such is the common expression STREAM OF ELECTRONS where water lends its terminology to electricity, or the more recent metaphor of LETTERS and WORDS in the genetic codes standing for the various combinations of amino-acids in various parts of the genes, storing its genetic INFORMATION. Scientists even talk about Genes LIBRARIES. Such metaphors emerge but are discarded or altered when the particular scientific area is developed enough and establishes its own independent well known terminology for relations and structures. Metaphors and models are altered also when they fail to explain and predict new scientific findings. For example, it is not clear whether the words and letters in the genetic code also have a syntax or something in the theoretical structure that parallels syntactic relations between words in the target domain as in the source domain of a linguistic theory. Once more we discern here the phenomenon of mappings meaning domains.

Thus, **cognitive metaphors** reveal patterns of cognitive structure (Jackendoff 1983; Turner 1991, Gibbs 1994 ); **culture-dependent and linguistic metaphors** sort out some conventional and linguistic mapping between semantic fields (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) with various degrees of generality and universality , and scientific as well as folk science metaphors reveal the effort to understand new realms of experience in terms of the more familiar ones. It is less clear what kind of structure is involved in decoding the fourth kind of metaphors, that of **poetic metaphors**, yet it has been claimed that such structures exist even there, where they are less expected (Turner 1991; Sovran 1993, Gibbs 1994).

R. Gibbs writes: "In some cases, interpretation of novel metaphor results in the explicit novel recognition that a new metaphor is being understood, one that demands greater imaginative power to be fully understood and appreciated.--- Still, what makes many uses of metaphor so creative is their novel way of articulating some underlying mapping between concepts that already structures parts of our experience" (Gibbs 1994:251-252). Many recent metaphor researchers strive at a unified theory which will outline the processes of creating and understanding all kinds of metaphors: Gibbs generalizes this view by saying that "In metaphor comprehension we understand one kind of thing or experience in terms of

something else of a different kind” (ibid. 248). M. Turner declares that he is interested in “the study of language and literature as acts of the human mind” (Turner 1991:48). He (among others) emphasizes the importance of the human body as a model for understanding the world in basic level metaphors, as well as in generic level metaphors. He suggests some general procedures or guiding lines that govern the decoding of both kinds of metaphors: 1) appealing to the nature of the things compared in a metaphor: 2) part-whole relations: and 3) the images of the constituting elements of various kinds of metaphor, a list we will see to be incomplete and insufficient. In the present paper we shall look for a more general schema that can be applied in the interpretation of all kinds of metaphors.

## 2. DECODING POETIC METAPHORS

The present paper focuses on the non-automatic procedure of understanding and of interpreting poetic metaphors. Sometimes this understanding is mediated by already more common conceptual schema or coined modes of speech. Metaphors, especially poetic metaphors, create a tension between the meanings of their components on the first lower semantic level. In the following parts of my paper I will refer to this tension and to the mechanism of resolving it by ascending the scale of abstraction.

The late poet Paul Celan is known for his extreme sensitivity and consciousness to language, and also for his obscurity and peculiar innovative usage. His poetry presents a challenge to anyone assuming that strategies or algorithms exist for decoding complex and obscure metaphors. We will start with the easier cases and proceed to the more complex ones.

The metaphor “Sprachgitter” “Speech-Grille” is the title of a book and of one of Celan’s well known poems. Reading the whole poem helps to clarify the unusual liaison between the two terms via several contextual clues. The metaphor is an apparent mismatch of two components belonging to distant semantic fields: language on one hand and metal-work, windows, perhaps prisons on the other. Yet the compound expression, despite its nominal construct which is syntactically relatively vague, is not lacking in meaning. The tension between the distant semantic nouns may be resolved through an existing mediating expression such as “language barrier” and its associated meanings: the twofold characteristic of languages as a means of communication and sometimes as an incomplete device for conveying private thoughts. Although language is the basic device for conveying thoughts, it is frail and incomplete and should not always be trusted. The effort to unfold the meaning of the ‘speech-grille’ metaphor is based on the assumption that words have some kind of logical ‘abstract wrapping’, which affects their usage, determine their place in their original semantic fields, relate them to higher-order abstract categories, and influences their aptness for metaphorical juxtaposition. The meaning of “grille” or “grid” or “latticework” is associated with a net, with an incomplete separation. In order to understand the meaning of the metaphor Turner might have referred here either to his ‘nature of the things’ strategy or to ‘images’. In our suggestion a higher level of abstraction is evoked where abstract features of both “grille” and “language” are shared and connected. Language is a means of communication, hence it has to convey something, to let it pass through. But the process needs a listener and there is no absolute guarantee that the message will come through. Words can also sometimes crystallize, reduce and ‘imprison’ the freedom and the creativity of genuine thought. The features of “restricted penetration” are shared by both the tenor - language, and the vehicle - grille, and of course this does not contradict the nature of both ‘objects’. One also has a clear image of a “grille”,



but what might count as the “image of language”, in Turner’s suggestion? The problem with this account is that when one has to refer either to the nature or the image of ‘language’ and ‘grille’ one is left with no clues to help determine the salient feature of the nature of thing that one is supposed to be looking for. Salience is relative: different juxtapositions render different properties salient and permit their entrance to the semantic interplay. Our suggestion shows where to stop the trial and error process of looking for abstract affinities. The procedure ceases exactly at the point where the level reached is sufficiently general and abstract to relate the compared tenor and vehicle to a common structuring set of traits. The double nature of the grille as barrier and conveyer is exemplified by the passage of sound and light through it to the person behind the bars, the same double nature is shown by the attempt to transmit, although in an incomplete manner, ideas and thoughts through language. One could refer here also to two of Lakoff and Johnson’s generic level metaphorical patterns: IDEAS ARE THINGS and THE MIND IS A CONTAINER. My suggestion does not conflict with the fact that these two pre-existing conceptual patterns may make the interpretation of a novel metaphor easier, and in some cases render its understanding almost automatic, as in Gibbs’ experience with people’s understanding of love poems (Gibbs 1994). However we claim that such conceptual patterns, however helpful, fail to grasp the full complexity of the novel metaphoric expression. Something else is needed in order to understand the meaning of the expression and the way it is incorporated in its context. The method suggested here is a bottom up procedure where every two items, words or concepts, combined in a metaphor can find an abstract level of conceptualization where they share features and where they actually match. An historical usage of the term “speech grille” refers to the window through which nuns used to talk to their guests. This additional information does not conflict with the general relations depicted by the abstract features mentioned above but adds the particular content of specific austerity and self constraints adopted by religious in their reduced relations with the common world through speech and other means of contact. John Felstiner in his: *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* remarks that the poem “Sprachgitter” was composed in 1955 after Celan married Gisele de LeStrange and after her widowed mother entered a Breton convent. When the Celans visited her they saw her only through a grille. Felstiner remarks: “This may have prompted “Speech-grille”: the French Catholic marquise vis-a-vis an east European Jewish poet, with all the otherness involved in this encounter” (Felstiner, 1995: 107). This situation is echoed also in the line “We are strangers”. We notice here how cultural as well as biographical information is added to, and accumulated on the words’ basic meaning juxtaposition, without contradicting it. Celan’s poem refers directly to what the metaphorical title of the poem and the book has already evoked before conferring other expressions on the poem; external knowledge; the twofold nature of communication; the wish for contact, as opposed to the barriers which bar the achievement of mutual absorbency. The same basic idea is expressed also in other parts also of the poem, depicting the absorbing of light in the eye and also in the terminal semi-oxymoronic line “Two mouthfuls of silence”, “zwei Mundvoll Schweigen”.

Further complex metaphors in Celan exemplify how the reference to an abstract mediating level helps in understanding the meaning of a puzzling compound or sentence. These are the two phrases “threadsuns” and “God’s jars”.

It is strange to refer to “suns” in the plural. The everyday experience of one sun, and folk pseudo-scientific knowledge conceive the sun as a singular, often determinate individual

object “the sun”. In developed scientific knowledge there is a place for galaxies and suns, but this is probably not what Celan had in mind in this particular poetic context.

“ Threadsuns (Fodemsonnen)  
Over the gray-black wasteness  
A tree  
High thought  
strikes the light-tone: there are  
still songs to sing beyond  
humankind “

(Felstiner 1995: 218)

This very short poem does not provide much elucidating context. One is to refer to the common meanings of the words and their usage in trying to tie together what at first sight refuses to be tied. If we wish to remain in the physical world we might understand the compound “threadsuns” as suns on a thread, evoking the association of round suns like beads on a thread. However, nothing in the poem implies that this direction is meaningful or compatible with the following lines. We therefore refer to the general strategy suggested, namely, the **ascending the scale of abstraction**. ‘A thread’, as opposed to ‘the sun’ is linear rather than round and can allude to the sun’s rays, as in the image of a clouded sun where only linear spokes are seen as in a child’s drawing. The regular round full shape of the sun is reduced to its rays which imply its covered existence. Turner might refer here to the image connection between “suns” and “threads”. Referring to images is not a strategy very different to the one suggested here, since abstract features of the image such as linearity or thinness are among what is looked for in the search for linking meaning components. The same holds true for what Turner calls ‘the nature of things’ where again general abstract traits of the things are compared and associated and become relevant to their interpretation. The synaesthetic compound light-tone connects the act of singing or writing poetry (in Hebrew the same word is used for both) to light. Associating the sublime threadsuns’ light with the composition of poetry which is able to depict what is “beyond human kind”. Critics have differed about the optimistic or pessimistic tone of this poem. But this dispute is not part of understanding the metaphorical compound “threadsuns” but rather of understanding the meaning of what lies “beyond humankind”. It refers either to the hidden divine or to its counterpart suggested in the expression “gray-black wasteness”. It is this very tension between the images of “threadsuns” (a sun not completely seen, yet existing) and of the “gray-black” wasteness that creates the unique atmosphere and theme of the poem. Thread may also give the sense of something fragile and yet string enough to make the connection between the wasteness and the writing of poems.

The last example from Celan’s poetry is the poem “The Jars“ “Die Krüge” taken from the book “Mohn und Gedächtnis” - “Poppy and Remembrance”. The title OF THE COLLECTION itself can be subjected to the same strategy of abstraction where abstract features of a plant belonging to the semantic field of flora are associated with the features from the semantic field of mental activities. The search here for the missing link is short and is ‘given’ in the real world: Poppy is a hallucinogenic plant, the source of cocaine and heroin,

hallucinations are some kind of non-voluntary mental activity and hence can be related by opposition to memory which is mostly intentional and conscious.

“The Jars  
 At the long tables of time  
 tipple the jars of God  
 They drink the eyes of the blind and of these who can see,  
 the hearts of the governing shadows,  
 the hollow chicks of the evening.  
 They are the mightiest drinkers.  
 They reach to the mouth the Empty as well as the Full  
 And never they overflow like me or like you ”

It is not clear what the ‘Jars of God’ denote in the real world. But the logical wrapping and conventional knowledge of both concepts helps to relate them at least vaguely. Jars are containers. God is conventionally grasped as a source of many things including creation itself, life and grace. But in this poem God is mentioned indirectly only as the owner of the jars, he is lacking in presence and in activity. The surrealistic image of jars as devilish drinkers in a nonreal drinking party is very powerful yet not very clear in meaning. Its power is augmented by the metaphor “the long tables of time”, “langen Tischen der Zeit”. The adjective ‘long’ refers to the most commonly accepted trait of time, its linearity. The setting of the poem is by no means human. It deals with superhuman powers in a timeless setting which is all of time. Human being are mentioned twice: ‘the blind’ and ‘these who can see’, incorporated in a demonic act of being drunk by these supernatural jars. Humans are again brought in by the indirect comparison to “you and me”, namely every human being. The poem is still very enigmatic, and there are no pre-existent conceptual hints here to provide us with any coherent interpretation. The only clue which in such an obscure poem, is doomed to be incomplete, remains the abstract logical relation between the active parties and their subjects; jars as containers which swallow everything and annul the essential demarcation between being blinded and being able to see or between ‘the full’ and ‘the empty’. These hollow jars, which are doubled by the evening’s ‘hollow chicks’ and the shadows, are never full, the process is continuous; hence the feast is taking place on God’s playground – table of everlasting time. We are left with the despairing abolition of human ability to see and understand in the face of superpowers which arbitrarily do just the inverse of what is expected of them – to flow and give and support and create subtle differences as part of a meaningful intelligible world. Instead of referring to Lakoff and Johnson’s particular pattern THE MIND AS CONTAINER which is related to the other pattern IDEAS ARE THINGS, Celan moves toward a more metaphysical examination of the very idea of CONTAINING. The name of the poem, “DIE KRUGE” supports this interpretation. There is an unbearable inversion in the war between the giver and the taker. There is no advantage of being able to see because the blind and the seeing are “swallowed” as well as the empty and the full. There is no end to this distracting process of devouring and tipping. Given Celan’s biography and other famous poems such as “Death fugue” and his suicide at the age of fifty, this early poem published in 1952 presents a very pessimistic view of the place of human beings and humanity in the wartime world. It also suggests that humans have thresholds and their ability to endure and to

swallow, unlike that of the jars, is limited. In a Hebrew poem “Ata bexartanu” (You have chosen us) composed by Alterman when the horrors of the holocaust became known, he portrays God as one who collects the murdered children’s blood in jars in order to smell it.

Celan is a very obscure poet but like many others he creates his own almost private symbolic iconic and associative language. The more we read the more we understand. Blindness and drinking and shadows are constant features of Celan’s gloomy

word view. Still, the poetic texture is inherently more enigmatic than other meaningful verbal interactions. And it is pointless to ask for a complete understanding of meaning of a poetic expression or of a complete poem. On the other hand poetry is a communicative endeavor, and the poet, obscure as he may be, leaves clues for the reader and the hearer. We have concentrated here on the linguistic logical ground that is the main means of conveying ideas through words. Poetic creativity allows for gaps in the linear process of associating ideas and concepts. But some of these gaps can be filled by referring to higher order logical and conventional structures, in the process of making sense of what is sometimes evasive and blurred.

### 3. METAPHORICAL FUNCTIONS

In comparing different kinds of metaphor we emphasized the reference to structures which are general and abstract and which allow overcoming apparent contradiction or tension created by metaphors. This tension is sometimes eased by habits and conventions and frequent linguistic idiomatic usage. The affinity of abstract structures is exploited in scientific metaphor in the effort to conceptualize new areas of knowledge. Sometimes such structuring freezes our understanding of the new fields for a long time and only new discoveries and puzzles push the scientific community to look for other conceptual models and metaphors. Such are the questions some neurological scientists have recently asked about the acceptability of the model of the mind as a computer. The calculating abilities of the mind supports such metaphor but other questions about storing , retrieving and the complex immediate association of information may suggest a new model with fewer mechanical restrictions. Nevertheless an abstract structure of some kind is needed in order to organize new scientific data in a way that will explain and predict the empirical facts. This reference to higher order abstract models and metaphors in science brings them closer, according to our present suggestion, to the way the understanding of poetic metaphors refers to the same abstract layers of conceptualization. The differences are in the novelty of the degree of conventionalization (which is highest in everyday and in cognitive metaphors) and in the obligation to truth and to experimental methodologies in scientific metaphors. When a poet associates two very distant concepts such as ‘long tables’ and ‘time’ for instance, he is not bound to the truth of such an association, but only to its meaningfulness, which can be related to human experience in a non-scientific way. Nevertheless it has to make sense. The real test for its meaningfulness is the act of acceptance by the reader and hearer. In scientific metaphors the tests for acceptance are different, they are restricted by mathematical and statistical methods of calculating and experimentation and cannot be free and playful as in poetry. Experimentation as well as the reference to mathematics and statistics severely restricts the choice of the possible models. But it is often claimed that great scientific minds leap over the known and make unexpected associations. As long as science, everyday communication and literature need language as their basic means of conveying ideas, they

will all have to submit in one way or another to its inner structuring rules. They do it differently yet they all need to refer to the important mechanism of hierarchy of abstraction.

Communication via language may be seen as a modular device in which words have meanings, they belong to particular semantic fields, yet they are also organized by higher order structuring categories. Different modes of discourse, like everyday discourse compared to the scientific or the poetic, leave a different quantity of gaps between what is known and what is novel, and require different efforts in filling these gaps, from no effort at all in everyday speech to the experimental effort in science to the peculiar poetic associative endeavor required in reading and understanding poetry. Language is rich, flexible yet structured enough to enable all sorts of human discourse.

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